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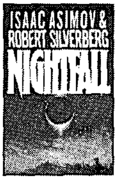
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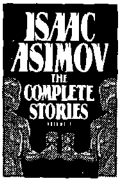
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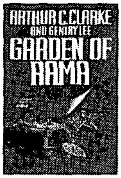
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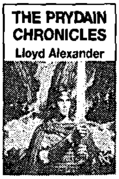
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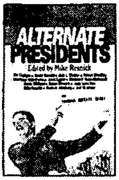
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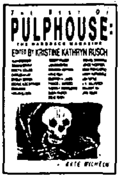
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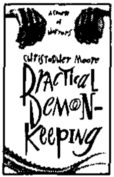
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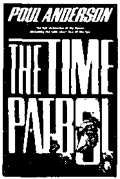
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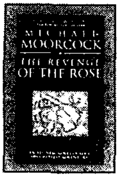
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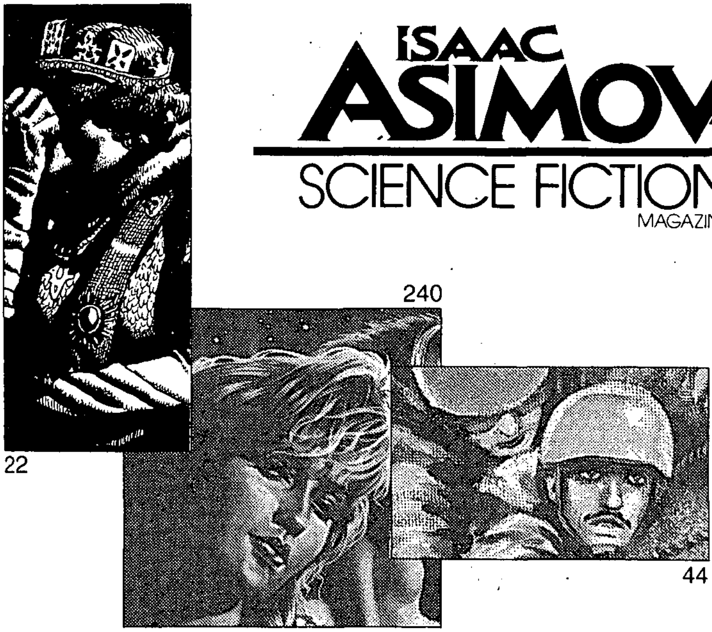

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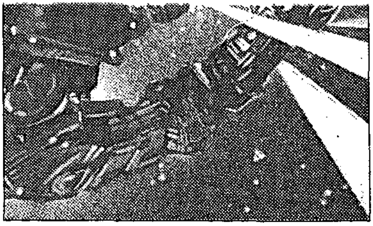

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

FOUNDATION

Back in the 1950's, I knew a fellow named Martin Greenberg. He is not to be confused with the fellow I know today named Martin H. Greenberg. I always call Martin H. "Marty." Marty is as honest as the day is long. He is to be trusted completely. This is not entirely true of the Martin Greenberg of the 1950's.

Now that we've got this straight, I can talk of Martin. Martin had a small publishing house called "Gnome Press." He frequently offered to publish a book of mine. Since I had never had a book published at that time, I found this a very attractive offer.

To be sure, Doubleday then published *Pebble in the Sky* in 1949 and Martin's offer of publication lost considerable of its luster. However, Doubleday did not want to do a collection of my short stories and when I presented one, they brushed it aside and said, "Write a novel."

Well, I didn't want to lose the collection either so, with a sigh, I took it to Martin Greenberg, who was willing.

Since the collection consisted of my robot stories, I called it "Carbon and iron" or something like that, and Martin turned that down instantly, and rightly so, too.

Martin said, "Let's call it *I, Robot.*"

"Impossible," I said. "Back in 1938, Eando Binder wrote a story that was published in *Amazing* and that was called *I, Robot.*"

To which Martin answered as any publisher would. He said, "F--- Eando Binder" and my collection came out as *I, Robot*. On the whole, it was an excellent title.

I don't give up easily. I wrote a novel called *The Stars, Like Dust* and Doubleday published it. So I brought them another collection of shorter pieces and they pushed it to one side and said, "Write a novel, Isaac."

Again I went to Martin Greenberg and again he agreed to publish it. The collection came out in three pieces which were called *Foundation, Foundation and Empire,* and *Second Foundation.* I have never entirely forgiven Doubleday for forcing those four books of mine into the hands of Martin Greenberg.

The books did reasonably well, but there was a catch. I never got paid for them. Martin always had some excuse which would account for the fact that I didn't get a statement. It was annoying, as you can well imagine.

Martin was under the impression that I was going to alternate books between him and Doubleday, but there wasn't a chance of that. After *Second Foundation,* all my novels went to Doubleday.

Martin objected. He said, "You were going to give me every other book."

I said, "Martin, where are the statements for the books of mine you have already published?"

That ended the conversation.

But then, some months later, Martin took me out to Long Island to take a look at a new house he was building—a beautiful house. He showed me all around, full of pride as to what he was doing.

I listened and then said, "Martin, if you can afford to build a house like this, why can't you afford to pay me some royalties now and then."

That ended our friendship, and I made up my mind I was never going to be paid for *I, Robot,* or for *Foundation* or for *Foundation and Empire* or for *Second Foundation.* I simply turned to the writing of novels, which Doubleday published regularly.

One day, I was visiting Doubleday and was in conversation with Tim Seldes who was my editor at this time. Tim said, "I have a request here from a Portugese firm that wants to reprint your *Founda-*

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tion books. Since we have nothing to do with those books, I will give you the request."

I sighed and said, "Tim, don't bother. I don't accept any requests for reprints of those books. I don't get paid for them."

"What do you mean, you don't get paid?"

So I told him the story of Martin Greenberg and Tim was furious. He said, "We'll get the books from him and Doubleday will publish them."

I said, "Doubleday will go broke trying to sell them."

Tim said, "You let Doubleday worry about that."

Doubleday's lawyers then seized Martin by the throat and forced him to disgorge. He did, too, and ever since, *I, Robot* and the *Foundation* books have been Doubleday property.

And a good thing, too, for under Doubleday, they began to sell very nicely and I began to get statements. What's more, as time went on, those books did better and better until before very long, I found myself to be rich.

Naturally, Doubleday wanted me to write more *Foundation* (who told them to reject the stories in the first place?) but I didn't want to. I had had enough of *Foundation*.

So for thirty-one years I wrote no *Foundation* stories. In fact, I all but stopped writing fiction and throughout the 1960s and 1970s, I wrote only non-fiction.

Well, not entirely. I wrote a straight mystery called *A Whiff of Death* and then in 1973, I wrote a very good science fiction novel called *The Gods Themselves*. That was written in part because my editor at the time, Lawrence Ashmead, insisted that I could not write sex. So I wrote the novel in such a way that the second part consisted of nothing but sex. Of course, it was extraterrestrial sex, but that didn't matter.

The Gods Themselves won both the Hugo and the Nebula. I had announced in advance that this would happen and everyone who heard me was horrified. They said that no one would vote for anyone so arrogant and that I had ruined my chances. But I hadn't. They voted for the novel despite my arrogance.

Then, too, I wrote a novelette entitled "The Bicentennial Man" and that also took both the Hugo and the Nebula.

Nevertheless, I did not write any *Foundation* books. Doubleday asked me, too, and I said, "Listen, I am anxious to write an autobiography. How about letting me do that instead?"

So they did and I wrote a fat two-volume autobiography entitled *In Memory Yet Green* and *In Joy Still Felt*. It sold a little bit but not the way a *Foundation* would have.

Consequently, when I had finished the autobiography, they called me in and apparently had lost their temper.

"Isaac," they said, "you are going to write a *Foundation* book."

I said, "But it's been thirty-one

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years. I don't remember how they go any more."

"Nonsense," they said, "just sit down and write."

"I'm scared," I said.

They said, "Look here. We're going to give you an advance of fifty thousand dollars."

That shook me. The advances I had had were anywhere from three thousand to ten thousand. I had never heard of a fifty thousand dollar advance.

I sat there, staring at them, and they said, "Here's the contract. Here's a pen. You sign your name right there and if you refuse we throw you out of the window."

So I signed and was stuck with writing a *Foundation* book when I didn't remember how they went. In fact, the first thing I did was to reread all three volumes.

I then got down to the job of writing the book and, let me tell you, it was simply awful. I was writing a novel when I had simply forgotten how *Foundation* books went. I just plain *suffered*, and decided that fifty thousand dollars simply wasn't enough.

But eventually, I finished the damn thing. I wanted to call it *Lightning Rod* but Doubleday insisted that it had to have *Foundation* in the title, so I called it *Foundation's Edge*. Doubleday then put out a cover in which it described *Foundation's Edge* as the "fourth book of the *Foundation* trilogy." I laughed heartily and said it was a clever way of attracting reader attention because, of course, we were describing it as the fourth book of a set of three. So Doubleday changed it, over my protests, to the "fourth book of the *Foundation* saga." I should have kept my mouth shut.

Anyway, the book came out just as the "New York is Book Country" street festival took place, and I stood around selling the book. You can imagine how dumbfounded I was when I found that the book sold like hot cakes. Apparently, readers had been waiting for thirty-one years and they wouldn't wait any longer.

What's more, when the New York *Times* best seller list came out, there was *Foundation's Edge* in thirteenth place. And it stayed on the best seller list for twenty-five weeks (!). The *Times* had no other Doubleday book on its list and all the Doubleday employees did everything but kiss my hands for, as they said, I had saved Doubleday (and their jobs, of course).

However, it bothered the hell out of me because I knew that once I had a whopper like *Foundation's Edge*, Doubleday would never let me go as far as writing a novel was concerned. In fact, when I handed in the manuscript then, even before they had any evidence of its success, they came to me with another contract and this time they offered me seventy-five thousand dollars as an advance.

I couldn't face writing another *Foundation*, however, so I asked with a certain trembling if I could write a robot novel instead. After some hesitation, they said, "All right," so I wrote *The Robots of Dawn* and followed that with *Robots and Empire*. These were two very good books though they didn't do quite as well as a *Foundation* book would have.

But apparently, Doubleday felt they had done enough for me and they said they wanted another *Foundation* book and to hurry up with it. So I wrote *Foundation and Earth*, not at all bad, but I ended with a device that left me unable to finish it. To this day, I have never finished the book.

And then I wrote *Fantastic Voyage II*. This was not my idea. Years earlier I had written *Fantastic Voyage*. A movie had been made out of it and it was very successful though I hated it. Apparently, some movie people thought a sequel would make a terrific movie, but I didn't think so and I refused to do it.

So they got Phil Farmer to do it and I heaved a sigh of relief and forgot about the whole thing.

Except that the next thing I knew there was a message from the various people involved. They told me they didn't like Phil Farmer's book and they still wanted me to do it.

I was thunderstruck. I knew that Phil was a crackerjack writer, probably better than I was, and I didn't see how he could fail. I demanded to see the manuscript and they showed it to me. It was not the kind of book I would write but it was full of excitement and gore.

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I returned the manuscript and told them there was nothing wrong with it and that I couldn't do as well.

They wouldn't listen. They insisted. But then I heard that they had not paid Phil Farmer for his work, so in a fury I wrote to them and said that unless they paid Phil in full I wouldn't even touch the book. So they paid him in full, and he wrote me a very nice letter in response.

Then I wrote the book. It was a very good book but it wasn't going to make a picture (to my great relief). The best thing about the book was that it had the United States and the Soviet Union rather friendly, several years before glasnost.

Now whenever people stare with astonishment at the developments in eastern Europe and say, "Who would have thought it?" I always answer, "*I* thought it," but no one listens.

The next thing that happened was the fact that I met a young man in the elevator of my apartment building. He said, "Dr. Asimov, why don't you write a book about Hari Seldon when he was a young man?"

I laughed and said, "I don't know what Hari Seldon was doing when he was a young man."

He said, "Make it up."

That got me to thinking. Why couldn't I make it up? So I went ahead and wrote *Prelude to Foundation,* in which Hari Seldon was thirty-two years old. Frankly, I think that is the best *Foundation* book I ever wrote.

Then my brilliant and lovely editor, Jennifer Brehl, came up with a new idea. She said, "Isaac, why don't you write a novel that has nothing to do with the *Foundation* or with the *Robot* books. Just something brand new."

"Oh, my goodness, Jennifer, I don't think I'll know how to do that."

"Sure you do," said Jennifer. "Just think about a good plot and then write it up. You can do it."

(Editors are always saying to me, "You can do it." I notice that they don't try to do it themselves.)

In any case, I went home, thought and thought and finally wrote the novel *Nemesis* which, as Jennifer had suggested, had nothing to do with *Foundation* or *Robots.*

Nemesis was sufficiently successful so that Jennifer then had another brilliant idea. It came about this way.

The original *Foundation* stories appeared in a magazine and came out in different lengths. Martin Greenberg decided to put them together in three books, and in the three books, they appeared in different lengths and with different people.

On the other hand, when I wrote *Foundation's Edge, Foundation and Earth,* and *Prelude to Foundation,* I wrote them as single books and, as a matter of fact, they didn't take up much in the way of events. The heroes of each story fought their way through.

Well, then, Jennifer thought it might be a good idea if I wrote a *Foundation* book in which the characters were new from one section to another.

I thought the matter through and decided that I would write a *Foundation* book (called *Forward the Foundation*) in which Hari Seldon gradually grew older. I would tell it in five installments and in each installment, Hari was ten years older.

I began work on it but then toward the end of 1989 disaster struck. I came down with congestive heart failure produced by mitral valve insufficiency. I was very sick and I was hospitalized for months. Actually, I was convinced I was going to die—but I didn't.

In fact, I said to my doctor, good old Paul Esserman, "Paul," I said, "I think I'm going to die and I want you to let me die in peace."

And he said, "I don't think you're going to die and I'm not going to let you die in peace."

And he didn't, and I'm still here.

But there's a catch (there's always a catch). I'm tired. I'm just plain tired.

I sleep a great deal and I drag around even when I'm not asleep. As an example, writing this essay means doing a page or two and then lying down to rest a bit.

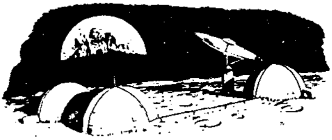
What's more, I find that it is difficult to walk and I have to use a cane, which is embarrassing.

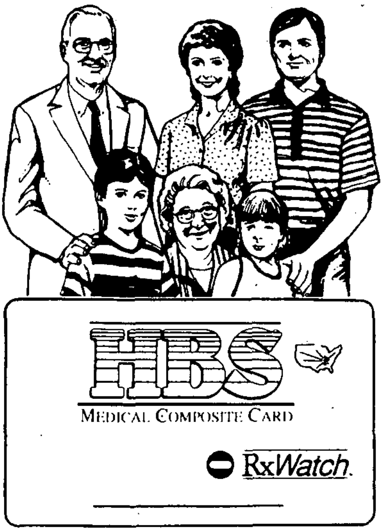
And the worst trouble is that I can't write very much. This is especially true of the new *Foundation* book. I wrote the first installment (in fact, it was published last November in this magazine) and the second and third parts are finished as well. The fourth part is almost finished but it's been weeks and weeks since I've been able to work on it. Nor do I know when I'll be able to get to it. Every time I try, I find I am too tired to work at it.

Whether I will improve with time, I can't say. Certainly, there seems no sign of it at the moment.

Believe me, I am sorry about this; more so than you can possibly be. ●

ANNOUNCEMENTS:
Joe Haldeman recently won the 1991 Rhysling Award for his short poem, "Eighteen Years Old, October Eleventh," which first appeared in our August 1990 issue. The poem will be reprinted in the *Nebula Awards 27* anthology, forthcoming from Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.





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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I am a Biology/Math student (I can't decide which I like more) who has made her living for the past nine years as a singer/musician (I prefer singing). I have just recently discovered your many talents as a writer and retainer of vast knowledge. You see, you were the subject of a research paper I did for one of my classes (on which I scored 100 percent). I was so impressed with what I read by and about you that I wanted to tell you so. I read an interview Bill Moyers did with you that appeared in *The Humanist* in 1989. I agreed with what you said about over-population, and I firmly believe that our society needs an attitude adjustment when it comes to procreation. I recently saw a talk-show that featured Mormon men with multiple wives whose only goal is to have many children. Some even had an exact number in mind, as high as fourteen! When the audience was asked what was wrong with this, I was shocked that NOT ONE PERSON mentioned over-population!

On a different issue, your editorial entitled "Untouchable" was right on. It voiced so well my own views on this so-called "Patriotism" shoved down our American throats by flagwaving politicians who care more about getting "Bubba's" vote than the issues at hand. This gradual chipping away at the basic rights guaranteed us in the Constitution really infuriates me, and frightens me as well. When will We the People stop confusing the importance of our flag with the importance of the principles it represents?

Also, I thought your lyric was amusing. I only wish I could have heard you sing it! I love your robot stories, and my favorite is "The Bicentennial Man." I also loved "Robot Dreams."

With Love and Admiration,

Kim Baker

The Mormon Church is now extraordinarily rich, so it's a bitter shame that they favor high birthrates.

I'm glad we agree as we do on my editorial, "Untouchable."

—Isaac Asimov

Dr. Asimov,

Re: your July editorial, "Disagreements." Last year I thought I'd heard the height of ignorant beliefs when a man, in all seriousness, asked me why hazardous and radioactive waste couldn't be disposed of on the moon. He honestly believed this would be a cheap and safe method of disposal.

Now I read your article with the person who believes overpopulation isn't a concern because it's not crowded where she lives. This person takes top honors in the ignorant department.

This person should visit here in Lackawanna Co., Pennsylvania. Every week tens of tons of garbage are imported from New Jersey and New York for disposal. Also, the former farm and woodlands are being destroyed for housing developments so people can have an estate on one half acre. People ask why I don't plan on having children and the answer is obvious.

The thing I can't understand is why are people like those you write of reading a science fiction magazine? I've always assumed SF readers were of above average intelligence since otherwise they couldn't fully appreciate the stories and concepts. Maybe it's true, ignorance is bliss. That's one for George and Azazel.

In closing I would like to thank you for all the fact and fiction you have entertained and educated me with over the years.

Sincerely,

David Kveragas
Clarks Summit, PA

Alas, people do tend to be ignorant, even when they read science fiction.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I read your editorial "Writing For Nothing" with great interest yesterday. I am one of the vast legions of penurious scribblers you mention, and coincidentally, I just got my first, and maybe only fan letter. No one has paid me a dime yet—the incidence of mental illness in this country is greatly exaggerated. However, I did get a fan letter.

Perhaps after receiving several million or so, you have forgotten what it is like the first time. Let me tell you. I opened the mailbox and thought, "Who is this woman, and why is she writing to me? I don't owe her any money." She omitted the title of the piece of scribbling she mentioned, but I managed to infer it from the context.

Actually, it took me a while to perceive it as a fan letter. I thought it was a letter from a nice person who spent the time and trouble to praise something I had done. Isn't that what fan mail is? I wrote her back; an intelligent, thoughtful, sensitive person like that clearly deserves every courtesy, even if her spelling and grammar are a trifle eccentric.

I'm not one of your greatest fans. I won't be camped out on the doorstep of Houghton Mifflin waiting for the first copies of *Opus 400,* but I think I've probably read more of your work than anyone in Central Texas. I started twenty-five years ago when I was twelve, and you'd written less than a hundred books. I've almost been able to keep up. I often think someone should publish a monthly *Asimov Newsletter* so people like me could stay abreast of the latest output and box score.

Lately I have been rereading your histories from the sixties. I managed to locate most of them by visiting six or seven libraries. The

Round Rock Public Library is still searching out a copy of *The Shaping of France* for me. I wonder, has anyone thought about reissuing them as a boxed set in paperback? They'd sell, of course. Will we ever see "The Complete Asimoviana" on CD-ROM? I hope so.

Seriously, let me say that you've been very important in my life. I was extremely sick most of my early life, and extremely lonely and isolated, particularly since I was the only proto-nerd for miles around in the various places we lived. It was very important to me to know that I wasn't the only example of *Homo nerdus* on the planet. I read a lot, and I read a lot of Asimov. It kept me alive. I'm still reading. Thank you so much.
Yours truly,

Ed Swain
Pflugerville, TX

I wish they would put out a collection of my history books. They just don't seem to want to. I am delighted that my books and stories helped you overcome your period of illness. I trust that you are now much better.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I don't want you to feel as if I'm taking up your time by making you read this letter. I know you're a very busy man. But I'd just like to tell you how much I enjoy your work and why.

Leo Tolstoy once wrote that good art is determined by its capacity to infect the observer with the artist's feelings and that the greater the clearness and the greater the sincerity of the artist, the better the art. I believe Tolstoy was right, because, in writing, complicated sentence structures and pretentious wording gives the reader a less firm grasp on the author's work and the author's point of view. It seems to me that without a doubt, you are the best author that exemplifies Tolstoy's theory of art.

To me it seems you make your main goal clarity. In everything I've ever read of yours (and there's been a lot), there have been clearly expressed viewpoints and ideas. There are many writers who seem, in my opinion, to do exactly the opposite.

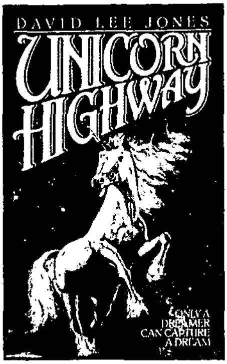
I always enjoy reading your editorials and introductions to your stories in your anthologies because not only do they sparkle with wit and charm, but they're sincere as well. I find that very endearing and pleasant. It's what makes a writer more of a human being and less of just a name and a face.

I really hope I haven't taken up a lot of your time. I've admired you and your work ever since I was fourteen. Unlike other writers, you consider the intellectual aspect of fiction to be more important than sex, violence, or profanity. Science fiction is how much an author can make the reader think, not how much he can abuse him.

To me, you'll always be my favorite SF writer.
Sincerely,

William Mathieson
Studio City, CA

I didn't know that Tolstoy was a strong believer in simplicity of writing. If so, I'm glad to be a follower of his. As you suggest, I do my very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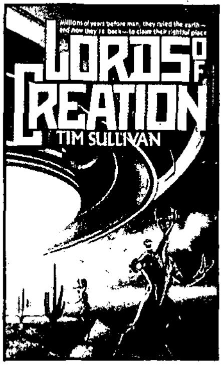
ALEXANDER JABLOKOV
CARVE THE SKY


Millions of years before man, they ruled the earth—and now they're back—to claim their rightful place
LORDS OF CREATION
TIM SULLIVAN

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In the deep Montana shale, paleontologist David Albee makes a remarkable discovery: a metal box containing prehistoric dinosaur eggs—warm, alive and ready to hatch.

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AVONOVA

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level best to have my writing reek of simplicity, and, as you further suggest, many writers seem to do exactly the opposite.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have been reading *IAsfm* regularly for ten years and before that I subscribed as often as I could afford it. I have written you before and you graciously answered my request for the title of your enlarged edition of *Asimov's Guide to Science,* which I immediately purchased. A couple of years ago in the Cokesbury book display at Pastor's School I picked up a copy of *Asimov's Guide to the Bible,* which has been a great help to me in sermon preparation. THANKS! I also have a letter from your wife Janet that I treasure.

I sent a story to *IAsfm* several years ago but of course it was rejected. Who did I think I was anyhow? Just because I had taken a couple of courses in writing and a workshop or two didn't make me star caliber. Anyhow, reading is more fun! When my magazine comes I read your editorial first, it is the reason I take the magazine. Then I read the letters to the editor, the book reviews and the poetry, after which I go to the back issues and read the stories people have written letters about and judge for myself.

By the way, science fiction is popular with ministers. My fellow seminarians used to gobble up the books I brought to read in my spare time. I wish your *Foundation* series was on video tape like the *Star Wars* trilogy, I think it would be wonderful. I read and reread the *Foundation* series, and Anne McCaffrey's *Dragons of Pern* series, over and over and watch *Star Wars,* and I am completely content. I say, "content," because one of my fellow ministers says, "You can't be happy, it is impossible!" Well I don't know about that, what is better than an evening with a good book except maybe a night with one you love.

I know you said to please be brief in your July 1991 editorial "Disagreements," sorry this got out of hand.

Grace and Peace,

Rosemary Williams
Bradford, AR

You keep learning new things. I never knew that science fiction was popular with ministers. I'm delighted that this is so.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Doctor, and I believe dear Mr. Searles,

My first letter to your august publication is spurred by a not very recent change which has annoyed me every time I've seen it: The addition of extraneous, useless, cutesy titles to otherwise intelligent and erudite book reviews. Having an unrelated title added takes away from the mnemonic value of the title itself, at least for me. I seldom take notes and *never* remember to take them to the bookstore, and rely on the spark of memory at the sight of a title to guide me to relevant reading. If I like the review of "The Madness Season," but the headline "Methodical Madness" is there in *much* larger type, which will I look for? What will I find? More likely I will forget it entirely.

A book review should stand on its own, with the *book's* title featured. It seems to me a reviewer's attempt to make a review into something more than a review, which is totally unneccessary. . . .

A separate item: I have saved almost every issue (except the one that got away, I'll never get it back) of the three SF mags to which I subscribe, and my rented garage is getting rather full. I am beginning to think I may not get around to going through them all to extract the most memorable stories, but I'm too attached to let them go to the recycler. Should I donate them to my local library, or are there readers who would buy them, or what? I'm beginning to realize that the cost of storage will add up to far more than any eventual antique value they may accumulate. What to do? Do you think they would be appreciated in Eastern Europe? Just send any requests to:

Lou Judson
Box 2219
Sausalito, CA 94966

You make a good point about "cutesy titles" to otherwise intelligent and erudite book reviews.

As to what to do with books that accumulate in your garage—I don't know. I think they would be appreciated in Eastern Europe.

—*Isaac Asimov*

Dear Mr. Dozois:

While I feel that most of the nuts-and-bolts type of literary criticism in this magazine belongs in Norman Spinrad's essays, I'd like to venture a comment on Janet Kagan's Mirabile novellas inspired by "Frankenswine," her latest to date.

The best kind of science fiction balances unusual situations with human response. The element in a piece that often makes it the most vivid is a realistic characterization of that response. Ms. Kagan's ideas are as good as those of any other writer you publish. Her characterizations are another story, as she enacts her ideas with a cast so in love with each other that it interferes with the storytelling on a number of levels.

I think she certainly has a good point on the need for closeness in a society on a frontier as unstable and uncertain as the planet Mirabile.

That point being made, however, the nonstop fest of grinning, kissing, and crowing with pride becomes too smarmy for words! And while I have no problem with lovable characters and happy resolutions, Ms. Kagan's cast seems fundamentally unchanged at the end of each story. Even though the objective of her novellas may be to show the triumph of happy-go-lucky humanity over the weirdest of (un)natural occurrences, the characters deny readers the basic suspense and satisfaction of a good fiction. There's never any doubt that each episode will end with a grin, a kiss or a good-natured growl. This quality would be enviable to a writer of material for light film or television. It could also be a cute effect in a much shorter story. But being drenched in molasses for forty-odd pages is just too much. A writer so in love with her characters, as Ms. Kagan appears to be, faces the same objectivity problem any of us might have in writing about someone close to us.

Yours truly,

Alan K. Lipton
Berkeley, CA

Wow, this is a reaction which must make Ms. Kagan feel considerable concern. John Campbell used to insist that humanity in science fiction stories must win out over all other forms of life. I objected on very much the grounds of Mr. Lipton, and took to writing stories about the galaxy which had no other forms of life in them.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Having just received the first issue of my new subscription to *IAsfm* (the January 1991 issue—yes, received in early May!) I read your editorial with interest and a feeling of familiarity.

Like yourself, I have very little knowledge of grammar in either of the languages I am totally fluent in (English and Spanish). However, I frequently find myself correcting the grammar or more usually the spelling of others who claim knowledge of grammar! I have a further problem in that being English with more ties to the U.S. than Britain (such as an American wife), it is necessary to differentiate between European and American English, so my solution in general has been to stick to the one version and spelling, even if unusual or ridiculous to the other, just for the sake of consistency (except of course if I am not understood).

Though your editorial referred mainly to similes and metaphors, I picked up on the comment that you know little grammar but have a good feel for the language.

Sincerely,

D.M. Salem
Puerto Plata
República Dominicana

Yes, indeed, I know little grammar but have a good feel for the language. I imagine that you are in the same category.

—Isaac Asimov

Mr. Dozois,

I realize that I'm a few months late on this, but I just finished Kim Stanley Robinson's story, "A History of the Twentieth Century, with Illustrations" in the April issue of *Asimov's,* and I felt compelled to write and thank you. I imagine you've gotten some complaints by now about publishing non-SF in your magazine, but I for one am glad that you are able to recognize excellent work when it is submitted, no matter how tenuous its connection to traditional science fiction.

You are an excellent editor, and all your awards are well deserved. And Robinson writes like a genius.

Thanks,

Robert Robillard
Bound Brook, NJ

Very good! I'm glad you recognize excellent work and are appreciative of the kind of work Gardner is doing.

—Isaac Asimov

CLARION AND CLARION WEST ANNOUNCE 1992 WRITERS' WORKSHOPS

CLARION WEST '92

Applications are now being accepted for the ninth annual Clarion West Writer's Workshop in Seattle, Washington. The workshop will be held from June 21 to July 31, 1992, at Seattle Central Community College. Writers in residence are Nancy Kress, John Shirley, Howard Waldrop, Pat Cadigan, Gardner Dozois and Dan Simmons. Approximately twenty students will be accepted.

In workshop sessions, students work with the writers in residence to critique students' stories. They meet with each week's writer for private consultations, are given assignments and writing exercises, and are expected to start and complete independent projects during the workshop.

Tuition in $995 until March 1, 1992. Late applicants will be considered until April 1, at a tuition of $1095. Housing, not including meals, is available at additional cost for the six-week workshop. Limited scholarships exist. College credit is also available at additional cost.

Please write or call for application and scholarship information: Clarion West, Suite 350, 15th Avenue East, Seattle, WA 98112, (206) 322-9083.

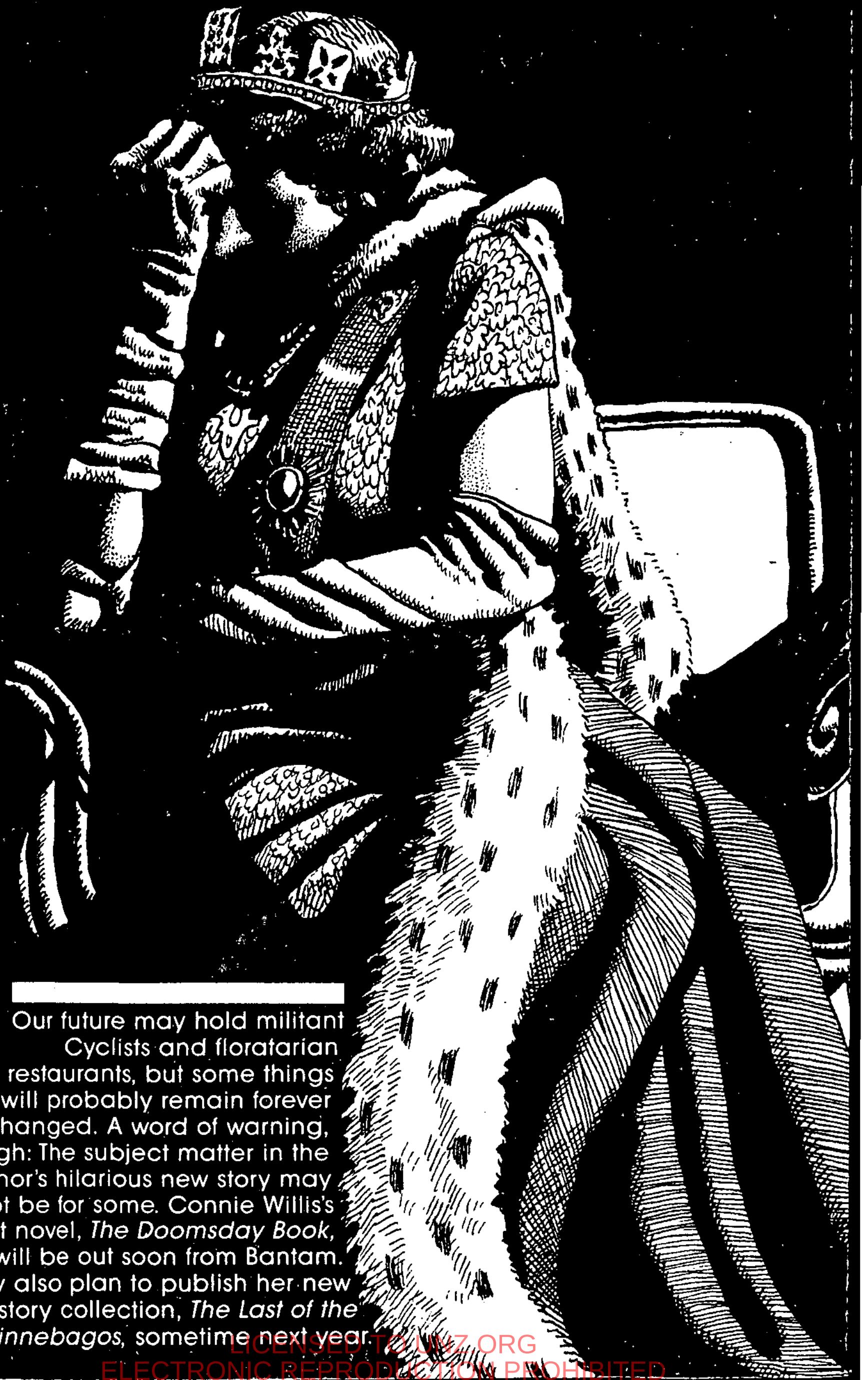
CLARION '92

The twenty-fifth Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop will be held at Michigan State University from June 28 to August 8, 1992.

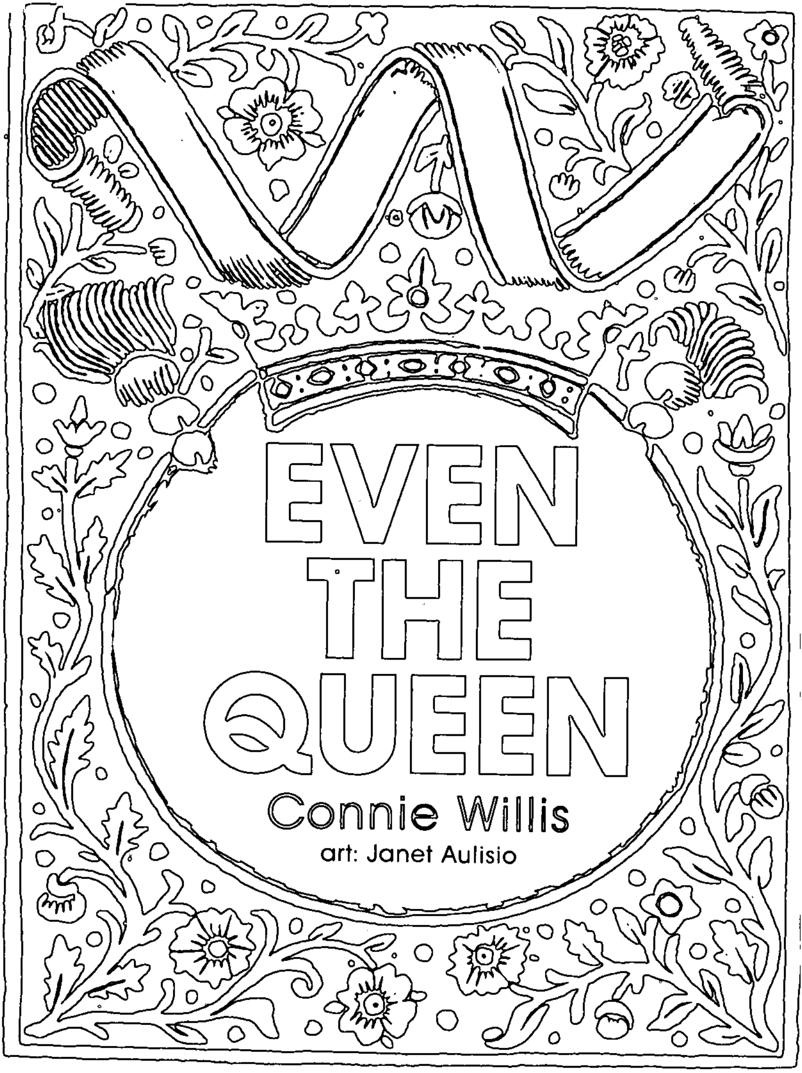
Clarion is the oldest and most successful writing workshop in the science fiction and fantasy field. Over a third of its graduates have published since leaving Clarion.

Writers-in-Residence for Clarion '92 will be James Patrick Kelly, Nancy Kress, Harlan Ellison, Elizabeth Lynn, Kate Wilhelm, and Damon Knight. Editors-in-Residence will be Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Dean Wesley Smith.

For application forms (Deadline: April 15, 1992), or more information, please contact: Robert Shelton, Director, ℅ Mary Sheridan, Clarion '92, Lyman Briggs School, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48825-1107. Phone: (517) 353-6486. Fax: (517) 336-2758.



Our future may hold militant Cyclists and floratarian restaurants, but some things will probably remain forever unchanged. A word of warning, though: The subject matter in the author's hilarious new story may not be for some. Connie Willis's latest novel, *The Doomsday Book*, will be out soon from Bantam. They also plan to publish her new short story collection, *The Last of the Winnebagos*, sometime next year.



EVEN THE QUEEN

Connie Willis

art: Janet Aulisio

The phone sang as I was looking over the defense's motion to dismiss. "It's the universal ring," my law clerk Bysshe said, reaching for it. "It's probably the defendant. They don't let you use signatures from jail."

"No, it's not," I said. "It's my mother."

"Oh." Bysshe reached for the receiver. "Why isn't she using her signature?"

"Because she knows I don't want to talk to her. She must have found out what Perdita's done."

"Your daughter Perdita?" he asked, holding the receiver against his chest. "The one with the little girl?"

"No, that's Viola. Perdita's my younger daughter. The one with no sense."

"What's she done?"

"She's joined the Cyclists."

Bysshe looked enquiringly blank, but I was not in the mood to enlighten him. Or in the mood to talk to Mother. "I know exactly what Mother will say," I said. "She'll ask me why I didn't tell her, and then she'll demand to know what I'm going to do about it, and there is nothing I *can* do about it, or I obviously would have done it already."

Bysshe looked bewildered. "Do you want me to tell her you're in court?"

"No." I reached for the receiver. "I'll have to talk to her sooner or later." I took it from him. "Hello, Mother," I said.

"Traci," Mother said dramatically, "Perdita has become a Cyclist."

"I know."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought Perdita should tell you herself."

"Perdita!" She snorted. "She wouldn't tell me. She knows what I'd have to say about it. I suppose you told Karen."

"Karen's not here. She's in Iraq." The only good thing about this whole debacle was that thanks to Iraq's eagerness to show it was a responsible world community member and its previous penchant for self-destruction, my mother-in-law was in the one place on the planet where the phone service was bad enough that I could claim I'd tried to call her but couldn't get through, and she'd have to believe me.

The Liberation has freed us from all sorts of indignities and scourges, including Iraq's Saddams, but mothers-in-law aren't one of them, and I was almost happy with Perdita for her excellent timing. When I didn't want to kill her.

"What's Karen doing in Iraq?" Mother asked.

"Negotiating a Palestinian homeland."

"And meanwhile her granddaughter is ruining her life," she said irrelevantly. "Did you tell Viola?"

"I *told* you, Mother. I thought Perdita should tell all of you herself."

"Well, she didn't. And this morning one of my patients, Carol Chen, called me and demanded to know what I was keeping from her. I had no idea what she was talking about."

"How did Carol Chen find out?"

"From her daughter, who almost joined the Cyclists last year. *Her* family talked her out of it," she said accusingly. "Carol was convinced the medical community had discovered some terrible side-effect of ammenerol and were covering it up. I cannot believe you didn't tell me, Traci."

And I cannot believe I didn't have Bysshe tell her I was in court, I thought. "I told you, Mother. I thought it was Perdita's place to tell you. After all, it's her decision."

"Oh, Traci!" Mother said. "You cannot mean that!"

In the first fine flush of freedom after the Liberation, I had entertained hopes that it would change everything—that it would somehow do away with inequality and matriarchal dominance and those humorless women determined to eliminate the word "manhole" and third-person singular pronouns from the language.

Of course it didn't. Men still make more money, "herstory" is still a blight on the semantic landscape, and my mother can still say, "Oh, *Tra*ci!" in a tone that reduces me to pre-adolescence.

"Her decision!" Mother said. "Do you mean to tell me you plan to stand idly by and allow your daughter to make the mistake of her life?"

"What can I do? She's twenty-two years old and of sound mind."

"If she were of sound mind she wouldn't be doing this. Didn't you try to talk her out of it?"

"Of course I did, Mother."

"And?"

"And I didn't succeed. She's determined to become a Cyclist."

"Well, there must be something we can do. Get an injunction or hire a deprogrammer or sue the Cyclists for brainwashing. You're a judge, there must be some law you can invoke—"

"The law is called personal sovereignty, Mother, and since it was what made the Liberation possible in the first place, it can hardly be used against Perdita. Her decision meets all the criteria for a case of personal sovereignty: it's a personal decision, it was made by a sovereign adult, it affects no one else—"

"What about my practice? Carol Chen is convinced shunts cause cancer."

"Any effect on your practice is considered an indirect effect. Like secondary smoke. It doesn't apply. Mother, whether we like it or not, Perdita has a perfect right to do this, and we don't have any right to interfere. A free society has to be based on respecting others' opinions and leaving each other alone. We have to respect Perdita's right to make her own decisions."

All of which was true. It was too bad I hadn't said any of it to Perdita when she called. What I had said, in a tone that sounded exactly like my mother's, was "Oh, Per*di*ta!"

"This is all your fault, you know," Mother said. "I *told* you you shouldn't have let her get that tattoo over her shunt. And don't tell me it's a free society. What good is a free society when it allows my granddaughter to ruin her life?" She hung up.

I handed the receiver back to Bysshe.

"I really liked what you said about respecting your daughter's right to make her own decisions," he said. He held out my robe. "And about not interfering in her life."

"I want you to research the precedents on deprogramming for me," I said, sliding my arms into the sleeves. "And find out if the Cyclists have been charged with any free-choice violations—brainwashing, intimidation, coercion."

The phone sang, another universal. "Hello, who's calling?" Bysshe said cautiously. His voice became suddenly friendlier. "Just a minute." He put his hand over the receiver. "It's your daughter Viola."

I took the receiver. "Hello, Viola."

"I just talked to Grandma," she said. "You will not believe what Perdita's done now. She's joined the Cyclists."

"I know," I said.

"You *know?* And you didn't tell me? I can't believe this. You never tell me anything."

"I thought Perdita should tell you herself," I said tiredly.

"Are you kidding? She never tells me anything either. That time she had eyebrow implants she didn't tell me for three weeks, and when she got the laser tattoo she didn't tell me at all. *Twidge* told me. You should have called me. Did you tell Grandma Karen?"

"She's in Baghdad," I said.

"I know," Viola said. "I called her."

"Oh, Viola, you didn't!"

"Unlike you, Mom, I believe in telling members of our family about matters that concern them."

"What did she say?" I asked, a kind of numbness settling over me now that the shock had worn off.

"I couldn't get through to her. The phone service over there is terrible. I got somebody who didn't speak English, and then I got cut off, and when I tried again they said the whole city was down."

Thank you, I breathed silently. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

"Grandma Karen has a right to know, Mother. Think of the effect this

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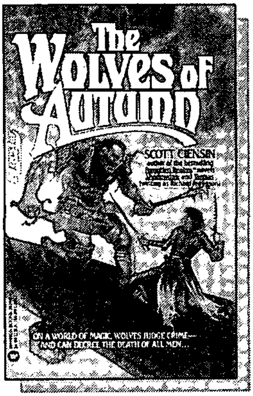

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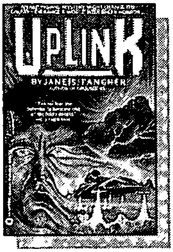

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could have on Twidge. She thinks Perdita's wonderful. When Perdita got the eyebrow implants, Twidge glued LED's to hers, and I almost never got them off. What if Twidge decides to join the Cyclists, too?"

"Twidge is only nine. By the time she's supposed to get her shunt, Perdita will have long since quit." I hope, I added silently. Perdita had had the tattoo for a year and a half now and showed no signs of tiring of it. "Besides, Twidge has more sense."

"It's true. Oh, Mother, how *could* Perdita do this? Didn't you tell her about how awful it was?"

"Yes," I said. "And inconvenient. And unpleasant and unbalancing and painful. None of it made the slightest impact on her. She told me she thought it would be fun."

Bysshe was pointing to his watch and mouthing, "Time for court."

"Fun!" Viola said. "When she saw what I went through that time? Honestly, Mother, sometimes I think she's completely brain-dead. Can't you have her declared incompetent and locked up or something?"

"No," I said, trying to zip up my robe with one hand. "Viola, I have to go. I'm late for court. I'm afraid there's nothing we can do to stop her. She's a rational adult."

"Rational!" Viola said. "Her eyebrows light up, Mother. She has Custer's Last Stand lased on her arm."

I handed the phone to Bysshe. "Tell Viola I'll talk to her tomorrow." I zipped up my robe. "And then call Baghdad and see how long they expect the phones to be out." I started into the courtroom. "And if there are any more universal calls, make sure they're local before you answer."

Bysshe couldn't get through to Baghdad, which I took as a good sign, and my mother-in-law didn't call. Mother did, in the afternoon, to ask if lobotomies were legal.

She called again the next day. I was in the middle of my Personal Sovereignty class, explaining the inherent right of citizens in a free society to make complete jackasses of themselves. They weren't buying it.

"I think it's your mother," Bysshe whispered to me as he handed me the phone. "She's still using the universal. But it's local. I checked."

"Hello, Mother," I said.

"It's all arranged," Mother said. "We're having lunch with Perdita at McGregor's. It's on the corner of Twelfth Street and Larimer."

"I'm in the middle of class," I said.

"I know. I won't keep you. I just wanted to tell you not to worry. I've taken care of everything."

I didn't like the sound of that. "What have you done?"

"Invited Perdita to lunch with us. I told you. At McGregor's."

"Who is 'us,' Mother?"

"Just the family," she said innocently. "You and Viola."

Well, at least she hadn't brought in the deprogrammer. Yet. "What are you up to, Mother?"

"Perdita said the same thing. Can't a grandmother ask her granddaughters to lunch? Be there at twelve-thirty."

"Bysshe and I have a court calendar meeting at three."

"Oh, we'll be done by then. And bring Bysshe with you. He can provide a man's point of view."

She hung up.

"You'll have to go to lunch with me, Bysshe," I said. "Sorry."

"Why? What's going to happen at lunch?"

"I have no idea."

On the way over to McGregor's, Bysshe told me what he'd found out about the Cyclists. "They're not a cult. There's no religious connection. They seem to have grown out of a pre-Liberation women's group," he said, looking at his notes, "although there are also links to the pro-choice movement, the University of Wisconsin, and the Museum of Modern Art."

"What?"

"They call their group leaders 'docents.' Their philosophy seems to be a mix of pre-Liberation radical feminism and the environmental primitivism of the eighties. They're floratarians and they don't wear shoes."

"Or shunts," I said. We pulled up in front of McGregor's and got out of the car. "Any mind control convictions?" I asked hopefully.

"No. A bunch of suits against individual members, all of which they won."

"On grounds of personal sovereignty."

"Yeah. And a criminal one by a member whose family tried to deprogram her. The deprogrammer was sentenced to twenty years, and the family got twelve."

"Be sure to tell Mother about that one," I said, and opened the door to McGregor's.

It was one of those restaurants with a morning glory vine twining around the *maître d*'s desk and garden plots between the tables.

"Perdita suggested it," Mother said, guiding Bysshe and me past the onions to our table. "She told me a lot of the Cyclists are floratarians."

"Is she here?" I asked, sidestepping a cucumber frame.

"Not yet." She pointed past a rose arbor. "There's our table."

Our table was a wicker affair under a mulberry tree. Viola and Twidge were seated on the far side next to a trellis of runner beans, looking at menus.

"What are you doing here, Twidge?" I asked. "Why aren't you in school?"

"I am," she said, holding up her LCD slate. "I'm remoting today."

"I thought she should be part of this discussion," Viola said. "After all, she'll be getting her shunt soon."

"My friend Kensy says she isn't going to get one, like Perdita," Twidge said.

"I'm sure Kensy will change her mind when the time comes," Mother said. "Perdita will change hers, too. Bysshe, why don't you sit next to Viola?"

Bysshe slid obediently past the trellis and sat down in the wicker chair at the far end of the table. Twidge reached across Viola and handed him a menu. "This is a great restaurant," she said. "You don't have to wear shoes." She held up a bare foot to illustrate. "And if you get hungry while you're waiting, you can just pick something." She twisted around in her chair, picked two of the green beans, gave one to Bysshe, and bit into the other one. "I bet she doesn't. Kensy says a shunt hurts worse than braces."

"It doesn't hurt as much as not having one," Viola said, shooting me a Now-Do-You-See-What-My-Sister's-Caused? look.

"Traci, why don't you sit across from Viola?" Mother said to me. "And we'll put Perdita next to you when she comes."

"If she comes," Viola said.

"I told her one o'clock," Mother said, sitting down at the near end. "So we'd have a chance to plan our strategy before she gets here. I talked to Carol Chen—"

"Her daughter nearly joined the Cyclists last year," I explained to Bysshe and Viola.

"*She* said they had a family gathering, like this, and simply talked to her daughter, and she decided she didn't want to be a Cyclist after all." She looked around the table. "So I thought we'd do the same thing with Perdita. I think we should start by explaining the significance of the Liberation and the days of dark oppression that preceded it—"

"*I* think," Viola interrupted, "we should try to talk her into just going off the ammenerol for a few months instead of having the shunt removed. If she comes. Which she won't."

"Why not?"

"Would you? I mean, it's like the Inquisition. Her sitting here while all of us 'explain' at her. Perdita may be crazy, but she's not stupid."

"It's hardly the Inquisition," Mother said. She looked anxiously past me toward the door. "I'm sure Perdita—" She stopped, stood up, and plunged off suddenly through the asparagus.

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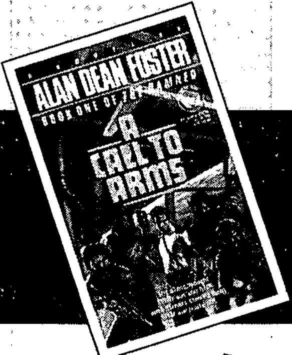
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I turned around, half-expecting Perdita with light-up lips or a full-body tattoo, but I couldn't see through the leaves. I pushed at the branches.

"Is it Perdita?" Viola said, leaning forward.

I peered around the mulberry bush. "Oh, my God," I said.

It was my mother-in-law, wearing a black abayah and a silk yarmulke. She swept toward us through a pumpkin patch, robes billowing and eyes flashing. Mother hurried in her wake of trampled radishes, looking daggers at me.

I turned them on Viola. "It's your grandmother Karen," I said accusingly. "You told me you didn't get through to her."

"I didn't," she said. "Twidge, sit up straight. And put your slate down."

There was an ominous rustling in the rose arbor, as of leaves shrinking back in terror, and my mother-in-law arrived.

"Karen!" I said, trying to sound pleased. "What on earth are you doing here? I thought you were in Baghdad."

"I came back as soon as I got Viola's message," she said, glaring at everyone in turn. "Who's this?" she demanded, pointing at Bysshe. "Viola's new livein?"

"No!" Bysshe said, looking horrified.

"This is my law clerk, Mother," I said. "Bysshe Adams-Hardy."

"Twidge, why aren't you in school?"

"I *am,*" Twidge said. "I'm remoting." She held up her slate. "See? Math."

"I see," she said, turning to glower at me. "It's a serious enough matter to require my great-grandchild's being pulled out of school *and* the hiring of legal assistance, and yet you didn't deem it important enough to notify *me*. Of course, you *never* tell me anything, Traci."

She swirled herself into the end chair, sending leaves and sweet pea blossoms flying, and decapitating the broccoli centerpiece. "I didn't get Viola's cry for help until yesterday. Viola, you should never leave messages with Hassim. His English is virtually nonexistent. I had to get him to hum me your ring. I recognized your signature, but the phones were out, so I flew home. In the middle of negotiations, I might add."

"How *are* negotiations going, Grandma Karen?" Viola asked.

"They *were* going extremely well. The Israelis have given the Palestinians half of Jerusalem, and they've agreed to time-share the Golan Heights." She turned to glare momentarily at me. "*They* know the importance of communication." She turned back to Viola. "So why are they picking on you, Viola? Don't they like your new livein?"

"I am *not* her livein," Bysshe protested.

I have often wondered how on earth my mother-in-law became a mediator and what she does in all those negotiation sessions with Serbs and Catholics and North and South Koreans and Protestants and Croats.

She takes sides, jumps to conclusions, misinterprets everything you say, refuses to listen. And yet she talked South Africa into a Mandelan government and would probably get the Palestinians to observe Yom Kippur. Maybe she just bullies everyone into submission. Or maybe they have to band together to protect themselves against her.

Bysshe was still protesting. "I never even met Viola till today. I've only talked to her on the phone a couple of times."

"You must have done something," Karen said to Viola. "They're obviously out for your blood."

"Not mine," Viola said. "Perdita's. She's joined the Cyclists."

"The Cyclists? I left the West Bank negotiations because you don't approve of Perdita joining a biking club? How am I supposed to explain this to the president of Iraq? She will *not* understand, and neither do I. A biking club!"

"The Cyclists do not ride bicycles," Mother said.

"They menstruate," Twidge said.

There was a dead silence of at least a minute, and I thought, it's finally happened. My mother-in-law and I are actually going to be on the same side of a family argument.

"All this fuss is over Perdita's having her shunt removed?" Karen said finally. "She's of age, isn't she? And this is obviously a case where personal sovereignty applies. You should know that, Traci. After all, you're a judge."

I should have known it was too good to be true.

"You mean you approve of her setting back the Liberation twenty years?" Mother said.

"I hardly think it's that serious," Karen said. "There are anti-shunt groups in the Middle East, too, you know, but no one takes them seriously. Not even the Iraqis, and they still wear the veil."

"Perdita is taking them seriously."

Karen dismissed Perdita with a wave of her black sleeve. "They're a trend, a fad. Like microskirts. Or those dreadful electronic eyebrows. A few women wear silly fashions like that for a little while, but you don't see women as a whole giving up pants or going back to wearing hats."

"But Perdita. . . ." Viola said.

"If Perdita wants to have her period, I say let her. Women functioned perfectly well without shunts for thousands of years."

Mother brought her fist down on the table. "Women also functioned *perfectly well* with concubinage, cholera, and corsets," she said, emphasizing each word with her first. "But that is no reason to take them on voluntarily, and I have no intention of allowing Perdita—"

"Speaking of Perdita, where is the poor child?" Karen said.

"She'll be here any minute," Mother said. "I invited her to lunch so we could discuss this with her."

"Ha!" Karen said. "So you could browbeat her into changing her mind, you mean. Well, I have no intention of collaborating with you. *I* intend to listen to the poor thing's point of view with interest and an open mind. Respect, that's the key word, and one you all seem to have forgotten. Respect and common courtesy."

A barefoot young woman wearing a flowered smock and a red scarf tied around her left arm came up to the table with a sheaf of pink folders.

"It's about time," Karen said, snatching one of the folders away from her. "Your service here is dreadful. I've been sitting here ten minutes." She snapped the folder open. "I don't suppose you have Scotch."

"My name is Evangeline," the young woman said. "I'm Perdita's docent." She took the folder away from Karen. "She wasn't able to join you for lunch, but she asked me to come in her place and explain the Cyclist philosophy to you."

She sat down in the wicker chair next to me.

"The Cyclists are dedicated to freedom," she said. "Freedom from artificiality, freedom from body-controlling drugs and hormones, freedom from the male patriarchy that attempts to impose them on us. As you probably already know, we do not wear shunts."

She pointed to the red scarf around her arm. "Instead, we wear this as a badge of our freedom and our femaleness. I'm wearing it today to announce that my time of fertility has come."

"We had that, too," Mother said, "only we wore it on the back of our skirts."

I laughed.

The docent glared at me. "Male domination of women's bodies began long before the so-called 'Liberation,' with government regulation of abortion and fetal rights, scientific control of fertility, and finally the development of ammenerol, which eliminated the reproductive cycle altogether. This was all part of a carefully planned takeover of women's bodies, and by extension, their identities, by the male patriarchal regime."

"What an interesting point of view!" Karen said enthusiastically.

It certainly was. In point of fact, ammenerol hadn't been invented to eliminate menstruation at all. It had been developed for shrinking malignant tumors, and its uterine lining-absorbing properties had only been discovered by accident.

"Are you trying to tell us," Mother said, "that men *forced* shunts on women?! We had to *fight* everyone to get it approved by the FDA!"

It was true. What surrogate mothers and anti-abortionists and the fetal rights issue had failed to do in uniting women, the prospect of

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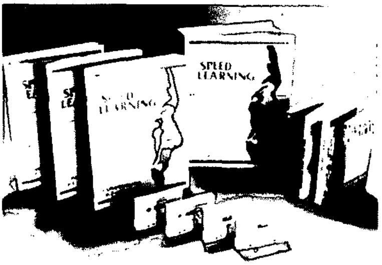

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not having to menstruate did. Women had organized rallies, petitioned, elected senators, passed amendments, been excommunicated, and gone to jail, all in the name of Liberation.

"Men were *against* it," Mother said, getting rather red in the face. "And the religious right and the maxipad manufacturers, and the Catholic church—"

"They knew they'd have to allow women priests," Viola said.

"Which they did," I said.

"The Liberation hasn't freed you," the docent said loudly. "Except from the natural rhythms of your life, the very wellspring of your femaleness."

She leaned over and picked a daisy that was growing under the table. "We in the Cyclists celebrate the onset of our menses and rejoice in our bodies," she said, holding the daisy up. "Whenever a Cyclist comes into blossom, as we call it, she is honored with flowers and poems and songs. Then we join hands and tell what we like best about our menses."

"Water retention," I said.

"Or lying in bed with a heating pad for three days a month," Mother said.

"*I* think I like the anxiety attacks best," Viola said. "When I went off the ammenerol, so I could have Twidge, I'd have these days where I was convinced the space station was going to fall on me."

A middle-aged woman in overalls and a straw hat had come over while Viola was talking and was standing next to Mother's chair. "I had these mood swings," she said. "One minute I'd feel cheerful and the next like Lizzie Borden."

"Who's Lizzie Borden?" Twidge asked.

"She killed her parents," Bysshe said. "With an ax."

Karen and the docent glared at both of them. "Aren't you supposed to be working on your math, Twidge?" Karen said.

"I've always wondered if Lizzie Borden had PMS," Viola said, "and that was why—"

"No," Mother said. "It was having to live before tampons and ibuprofen. An obvious case of justifiable homicide."

"I hardly think this sort of levity is helpful," Karen said, glowering at everyone.

"Are you our waitress?" I asked the straw-hatted woman hastily.

"Yes," she said, producing a slate from her overalls pocket.

"Do you serve wine?" I asked.

"Yes. Dandelion, cowslip, and primrose."

"We'll take them all," I said.

"A bottle of each?"

"For now. Unless you have them in kegs."

"Our specials today are watermelon salad and *choufleur gratinée*," she said, smiling at everyone. Karen and the docent did not smile back. "You hand-pick your own cauliflower from the patch up front. The floratarian special is sautéed lily buds with marigold butter."

There was a temporary truce while everyone ordered. "I'll have the sweet peas," the docent said, "and a glass of rose water."

Bysshe leaned over to Viola. "I'm sorry I sounded so horrified when your grandmother asked if I was your livein," he said.

"That's okay," Viola said. "Grandma Karen can be pretty scary."

"I just didn't want you to think I didn't like you. I do. Like you, I mean."

"Don't they have soyburgers?" Twidge asked.

As soon as the waitress left, the docent began passing out the pink folders she'd brought with her. "These will explain the working philosophy of the Cyclists," she said, handing me one, "along with practical information on the menstrual cycle." She handed Twidge one.

"It looks just like those books we used to get in junior high," Mother said, looking at hers. " 'A Special Gift,' they were called, and they had all these pictures of girls with pink ribbons in their hair, playing tennis and smiling. Blatant misrepresentation."

She was right. There was even the same drawing of the fallopian tubes I remembered from my middle school movie, a drawing that had always reminded me of *Alien* in the early stages.

"Oh, yuck," Twidge said. "This is disgusting."

"Do your math," Karen said.

Bysshe looked sick. "Did women really *do* this stuff?"

The wine arrived, and I poured everyone a large glass. The docent pursed her lips disapprovingly and shook her head. "The Cyclists do not use the artificial stimulants or hormones that the male patriarchy has forced on women to render them docile and subservient."

"How long do you menstruate?" Twidge asked.

"Forever," Mother said.

"Four to six days," the docent said. "It's there in the booklet."

"No, I mean, your whole life or what?"

"A woman has her menarche at twelve years old on the average and ceases menstruating at age fifty-five."

"I had my first period at eleven," the waitress said, setting a bouquet down in front of me. "At school."

"I had my last one on the day the FDA approved *ammenerol,"* Mother said.

"Three hundred and sixty-five divided by twenty-eight," Twidge said, writing on her slate. "Times forty-three years." She looked up. "That's five hundred and fifty-nine periods."

"That can't be right," Mother said, taking the slate away from her. "It's at least five thousand."

"And they all start on the day you leave on a trip," Viola said.

"Or get married," the waitress said.

Mother began writing on the slate.

I took advantage of the ceasefire to pour everyone some more dandelion wine.

Mother looked up from the slate. "Do you realize with a period of five days, you'd be menstruating for nearly three thousand days? That's over eight solid years."

"And in between there's PMS," the waitress said, delivering flowers.

"What's PMS?" Twidge asked.

"Pre-menstrual syndrome was the name the male medical establishment fabricated for the natural variation in hormonal levels that signal the onset of menstruation," the docent said. "This mild and entirely normal fluctuation was exaggerated by men into a debility." She looked at Karen for confirmation.

"I used to cut my hair," Karen said.

The docent looked uneasy.

"Once I chopped off one whole side," Karen went on. "Bob had to hide the scissors every month. And the car keys. I'd start to cry every time I hit a red light."

"Did you swell up?" Mother asked, pouring Karen another glass of dandelion wine.

"I looked just like Orson Welles."

"Who's Orson Welles?" Twidge asked.

"Your comments reflect the self-loathing thrust on you by the patriarchy," the docent said. "Men have brainwashed women into thinking menstruation is evil and unclean. Women even called their menses 'the curse' because they accepted men's judgment."

"I called it the curse because I thought a witch must have laid a curse on me," Viola said. "Like in 'Sleeping Beauty.' "

Everyone looked at her.

"Well, I did," she said. "It was the only reason I could think of for such an awful thing happening to me." She handed the folder back to the docent. "It still is."

"I think you were awfully brave," Bysshe said to Viola, "going off the ammenerol to have Twidge."

"It was awful," Viola said. "You can't imagine."

Mother sighed. "When I got my period, I asked my mother if Annette had it, too."

"Who's Annette?" Twidge said.

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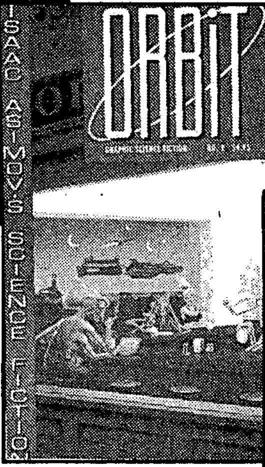
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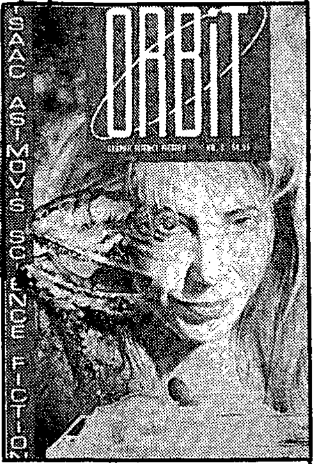
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"A Mouseketeer," Mother said and added, at Twidge's uncomprehending look, "On TV."

"High-rez," Viola said.

"The Mickey Mouse Club," Mother said.

"There was a high-rezzer called the Mickey Mouse Club?" Twidge said incredulously.

"They were days of dark oppression in many ways," I said.

Mother glared at me. "Annette was every young girl's ideal," she said to Twidge. "Her hair was curly, she had actual breasts, her pleated skirt was always pressed, and I could not imagine that she could have anything so *messy* and undignified. Mr. Disney would never have allowed it. And if Annette didn't have one, I wasn't going to have one either. So I asked my mother—"

"What did she say?" Twidge cut in.

"She said every woman had periods," Mother said. "So I asked her, 'Even the Queen of England?' and she said, 'Even the Queen.' "

"Really?" Twidge said. "But she's so *old!*"

"She isn't having it now," the docent said irritatedly. "I told you, menopause occurs at age fifty-five."

"And then you have hot flashes," Karen said, "and osteoporosis and so much hair on your upper lip you look like Mark Twain."

"Who's—" Twidge said.

"You are simply reiterating negative male propaganda," the docent interrupted, looking very red in the face.

"You know what I've always wondered?" Karen said, leaning conspiratorially close to Mother. "If Maggie Thatcher's menopause was responsible for the Falklands War."

"Who's Maggie Thatcher?" Twidge said.

The docent, who was now as red in the face as her scarf, stood up. "It is clear there is no point in trying to talk to you. You've all been completely brainwashed by the male patriarchy." She began grabbing up her folders. "You're blind, all of you! You don't even see that you're victims of a male conspiracy to deprive you of your biological identity, of your very womanhood. The Liberation wasn't a liberation at all. It was only another kind of slavery!"

"Even if that were true," I said, "even if it had been a conspiracy to bring us under male domination, it would have been worth it."

"She's right, you know," Karen said to Mother. "Traci's absolutely right. There are some things worth giving up anything for, even your freedom, and getting rid of your period is definitely one of them."

"Victims!" the docent shouted. "You've been stripped of your femininity, and you don't even care!" She stomped out, destroying several squash and a row of gladiolas in the process.

"You know what I hated most before the Liberation?" Karen said, pouring the last of the dandelion wine into her glass. "Sanitary belts."

"And those cardboard tampon applicators," Mother said.

"I'm never going to join the Cyclists," Twidge said.

"Good," I said.

"Can I have dessert?"

I called the waitress over, and Twidge ordered sugared violets. "Anyone else want dessert?" I asked. "Or more primrose wine?"

"I think it's wonderful the way you're trying to help your sister," Bysshe said, leaning close to Viola.

"And those Modess ads," Mother said. "You remember, with those glamorous women in satin brocade evening dresses and long white gloves, and below the picture was written, 'Modess, because. . . .' I thought Modess was a perfume."

Karen giggled. "I thought it was a brand of *champagne!*"

"I don't think we'd better have any more wine," I said.

The phone started singing the minute I got to my chambers the next morning, the universal ring.

"Karen went back to Iraq, didn't she?" I asked Bysshe.

"Yeah," he said. "Viola said there was some snag over whether to put Disneyland on the West Bank or not."

"When did Viola call?"

Bysshe looked sheepish. "I had breakfast with her and Twidge this morning."

"Oh." I picked up the phone. "It's probably Mother with a plan to kidnap Perdita. Hello?"

"This is Evangeline, Perdita's docent," the voice on the phone said. "I hope you're happy. You've bullied Perdita into surrendering to the enslaving male patriarchy."

"I have?" I said.

"You've obviously employed mind control, and I want you to know we intend to file charges." She hung up. The phone rang again immediately, another universal.

"What is the good of signatures when no one ever uses them?" I said and picked up the phone.

"Hi, Mom," Perdita said. "I thought you'd want to know I've changed my mind about joining the Cyclists."

"Really?" I said, trying not to sound jubilant.

"I found out they wear this red scarf thing on their arm. It covers up Sitting Bull's horse."

"That is a problem," I said.

"Well, that's not all. My docent told me about your lunch. Did Grandma Karen really tell you you were right?"

"Yes."

"Gosh! I didn't believe that part. Well, anyway, my docent said you wouldn't listen to her about how great menstruating is, that you all kept talking about the negative aspects of it, like bloating and cramps and crabbiness, and I said, 'What are cramps?' and she said, 'Menstrual bleeding frequently causes headaches and discomfort,' and I said, 'Bleeding?!? Nobody ever said anything about bleeding!' Why didn't you tell me there was blood involved, Mother?"

I had, but I felt it wiser to keep silent.

"And you didn't say a word about its being painful. And all the hormone fluctuations! Anybody'd have to be crazy to want to go through that when they didn't have to! How did you stand it before the Liberation?"

"They were days of dark oppression," I said.

"I *guess!* Well, anyway, I quit and now my docent is really mad. But I told her it was a case of personal sovereignty, and she has to respect my decision. I'm still going to become a floratarian, though, and I *don't* want you to try to talk me out of it."

"I wouldn't dream of it," I said.

"You know, this whole thing is really your fault, Mom! If you'd told me about the pain part in the first place, none of this would have happened. Viola's right! You never tell us *anything!*"●

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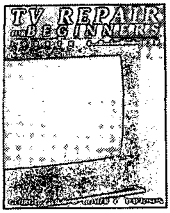
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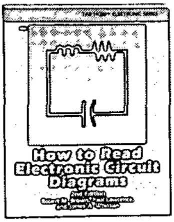
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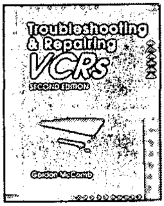
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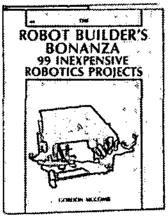
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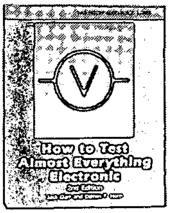
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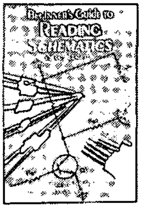
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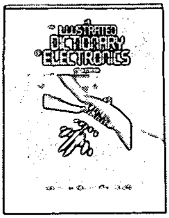
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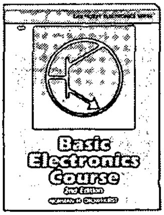
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After receiving an MA in English from Washington University in St. Louis, Tony Daniel studied film at the University of Southern California. It was at USC that, he says, he truly learned how to structure a story. Mr. Daniel is also a 1989 graduate of Clarion West, and he has since sold stories to *IAsfm, F&SF, Full Spectrum 3*, and *Universe 2*.

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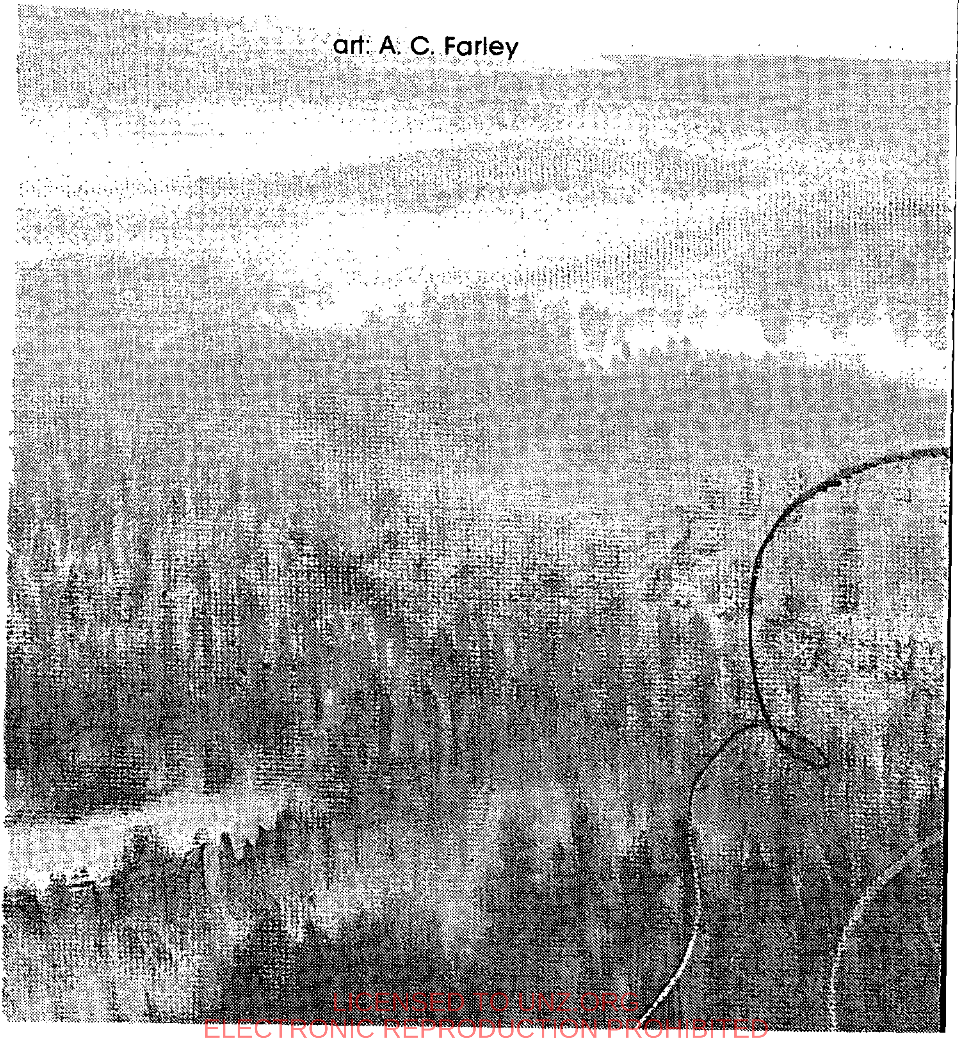

FACES

by Tony Daniel

FADE IN

Morning in the lower Appalachians. VERONICA COLLRIDGE-KOLI, 39, our undaunted heroine, is ascending the middle pitch of Looking Glass Knob, about a 3.8 climb. Nothing Veronica can't handle. She's got a Yosemite climber in there somewhere, wanting to come out.

The sun is fully risen now, shining directly upon the face of the mountain. The rock is stark, all brilliant shine and deep blacks. From the top of the knob, several lines of trees descend part of the way down. The knob is mostly stone, though. It's smaller than the surrounding peaks, more rounded. Not a mountain, but an old mountain heart, with strips of pericardial tissue—the trees hanging limp down its sides. A voice calls to Veronica from below. She pauses for moment, shakes her head—we can make out the motion of her blonde hair—then continues upward. Again there is a call from below, which is

MURALI KOLI, 37, an American Pakistani, Veronica's husband. He is belaying Veronica. He's very dark, and wearing a gray jacket. He is so dark against the dark rock where he is anchored that, seen from a distance, the belay rope seems to tuck itself into a fissure in the cliff, then fall out again. Murali's wedding ring flashes as he guides the rope through a carabiner, and, knowing he is there, with an effort we can shape the lines and folds near the ring's flash into a human pattern.

And goddammit, I *told* him to take off that ring before he started climbing. I lowered the zoom binoculars from my eyes and got out of memory-banking mode. Sharon, my film-maker underlay, muttered a "damn," and receded into my subconsciousness. I mentally popped up the menu of my communications algorithm, my comrithm, into my peripheral vision, while at the same time keeping an eye on Murali. I wanted to talk just with him, and not dress him down with his wife listening in, but my readouts said he'd turned down the individual frequency I'd assigned him and had full gain turned *up* on the dual frequency he and Veronica shared. I queried Veronica's comrithm, and found she'd turned off her radio completely. Great. A fight—two hundred feet above the ground, with only each other and a thin length of nylon keeping them stuck to the wall.

You go to make some art, start getting into it, and all hell breaks loose in the meantime. I should have known better than to let half-formed cellheads do their own thing, even for a couple of minutes. Too dangerous out here, away from Citycellular and constant personality maintenance.

I winked the selector to the send button in the communications menu and mentally pressed it down.

"All right, Murali, what's the problem?" I thought. I put a calm, inquisitive inflection on the transmission. I spoke the words aloud at the same time, but they came out as more of a curse than a question. Nobody heard me, of course. I was too far away. Murali answered the radio message.

"I said something stupid and she got mad." Murali had an extremely soft "voice," which came across on radio as a whisper in a very small room.

"She's off the radio," I said.

"She said she would climb it herself."

"Free climb?"

"Is that what you call it?"

Damn. God damn.

"I'm coming up."

"Don't come up, Francis. It'll only make her angrier."

I thought about it a moment. Mark, my climber-underlay, gave me his opinion: Veronica had a Yosemite Gold underlay, expensive, competent—an old friend of his, in fact. But she was inexperienced. She was too cocky, and probably furious. Not the best state to be in when you're breaking in a new underlay.

I'd learned over the last week that Veronica didn't bottle up her anger, and she didn't turn it to positive, creative purpose, either. Instead, she took her mad out on whatever or whoever was around her. Or at least one of her underlays did. With cellheads, sometimes it's hard to tell just *who's* been broken in, the human or the algorithm. "She's not good enough to go off-rope," I said. "Not yet, anyway."

Murali kind of whisper-whined his disapproval back to me. Probably he didn't even realize that he was sending. I jogged toward the cliff. Murali was going to be useless, I could tell, and I was going to start resenting him. Which was too bad, because I'd developed a sort of grudging liking for him over the last seven days. Sure, he was a whiner, and he groveled like a man who came out of the womb flinching, but he put up with Veronica with a kind of unrelenting patience, and got his way about half of the time through sheer neutral absorption, like some huge, blackbody heat-sink.

Veronica was white fire in the morning and sheet lightning at night. She was simmering now, and her underlays should be leaking into each other like flavors in a stew when you cook it. That was what this trip was supposed to be all about, after all. I suspected that Veronica was close to being well-done, integrated, but more from force of will than by any natural process. I felt sorry for her poor underlays—and for Murali, who was practically an underlay for Veronica himself. Not much question as to who got to be on top when they fucked.

I reached the base of the knob's north face and started up. I wasn't sure what I could do up on the rock, but I sure as hell couldn't do a thing on the ground if Veronica peeled off, came hurtling down, and landed at my feet. It would be too late for anything then. I climbed quickly, but carefully. If I'd had more time, I would have self-belayed—I get no particular thrill out of climbing without a rope—but I had no time, so I concentrated on finding safe holds and jams for my hands and feet, and on selecting an easy but direct route.

But finding a fast route wasn't really possible on this part of the knob. We'd been climbing for the last three days, tackling progressively harder cliffs. Today's rock had to be crossed dynamically and thoughtfully. You couldn't just muscle up it with your legs, just using your hands for psychological bracing. Climbing this face was like cracking an ingenious code. Mark was relishing every minute of it. I could feel him, on the edge of my consciousness, existing in the pure present, planning on the run like a hunting animal. Mark finally had a task worthy of him.

"Veronica unclipped from the rope," said Murali over the radio. His thought-voice was trembling. "There may be a problem."

"What is it?"

"I don't think I can stay here."

"Don't you try anything like Veronica. Just stay put. I'll be there soon." I was about sixty feet under him.

"No, I don't think I can *stay* here." There was an understated urgency to his voice, as if he were terrified and terribly embarrassed of it. "I think my protection is coming out."

This seemed unlikely. Murali was almost pathologically careful about his placement of cams and chocks.

"Take your weight completely off it and check it."

He answered almost immediately. "I don't think I can stay here."

Murali was flipping out.

I leaned back and yelled as loudly as I could. "Veronica, turn on your damn radio!" There was no answer, and I kept climbing. "I'm coming, Murali."

Goddamn cellhead. No, that wasn't a good thought. City boys like Murali were what paid for my forest permits. Sure, I took to the woods to get away from people like Veronica and, to a lesser extent, Murali. But I quickly found out what being out of Citycellular really meant. Out here, you had to fend for yourself, and nobody gave a shit if you didn't make it. The price of freedom is indifference—and don't let anybody tell you otherwise, the universe is an extremely indifferent place. Or, to put it another way: the world has bigger priorities than the survival of one

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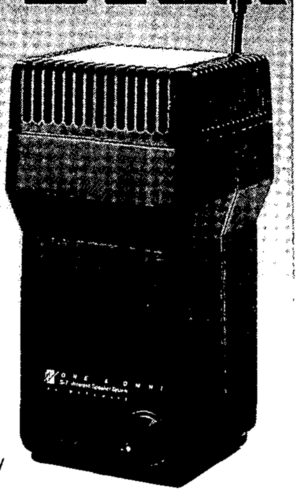

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piddly-piss misfit. You have to earn your own way—and that was just what I was doing.

There are more of us out here than you'd think, and we've adapted. It's either that or die. Or go back to the city and back to being a cellhead. Hell, *that's* not really an option. So we live off the tourists. I do better than most since I adopted the education angle. I bill myself as Dr. Francis McComb, Director of the Wilderness Leadership Integration Program, though my Ph.D. is in, of all things, game theory *cum* philosophy . . . and if you believe leadership can be taught, I've got a couple of carloads of skunk scat I'd like to sell you for its aphrodisiac qualities.

"Oh, shit, shit, shit, shit," said Murali. I was close enough both to hear him and pick him up over the radio. "This is entirely unacceptable. I have commitments, a plan for advancement over the next decade. This experience is not forwarding that plan."

Murali's underlays were starting to surface, and he was not in control of them. I recognized this as Murali's business underlay, probably some CEO, complete with ambition. Murali would probably be making payments on it until the day he died. It was the voice he'd used to speak to me on the phone when he and Veronica had arranged this trip. A brisk, forceful voice. I'd never expected its owner to be a skinny, soft-handed fellow who couldn't hold eye contact for more than five seconds.

"There's no problem, Murali. Just hold still. Close your eyes if it helps."

"Oh Christ. Oh Christ. Veronica's gonna kill me. This is not Bosmia attitude."

Murali and Veronica were not just married, they were corporately bonded. Murali headed the Charleston Bosmia office, and Veronica was one of the conglomerate's trouble shooters. She worked out of Charleston, too, and Murali was supposed to be her boss.

"But Bosmia is not a pyramid; we're flexible along hierarchical lines," Murali had told me as we sat around the cook stove one night, boiling up some beef-flavored ramen. "For instance, I report to Bosmia-America in Dallas—"

"And to his regional director, and to a triad of assistants in Charleston," said Veronica. "Even a representative from the janitorial staff has limited input."

"So that every decision is not one-sided, blind to this or that possibility," continued Murali, with that infinite patience of his. "Instead, it's a nexus of inputs, a synthesis where the parts are greater than the whole."

I mulled it over for a second.

"So, for example, if you want to design an animal that will carry people, you won't forget that it might have to go across the desert," I said.

Veronica smiled. Murali didn't catch the joke.

"It works much better than old-fashioned committees," she said. "You wouldn't get a camel, you'd get a better horse. Bosmia doesn't sell a product, it applies a method."

They didn't know it, but the method I was applying to them out here in the woods was designed precisely to counteract the Bosmia attitude. A committee is a committee, no matter what the jargon, and I am their sworn enemy. Bosmia-think permeated society like rancid sugar in a cake. Big companies and big governments had been in the camel-designing business for centuries, but nowadays everybody was rank with it.

Despite all the techtalk, upscales like Veronica and Murali were perfect examples of befuddlement. You slave-in twenty to twenty-five personality underlays into the same brain, give them access to a thousand more, and what you have is *not* an elite team of experts working for a common purpose—it's a mob. I know. I used to be a cellhead myself.

Sure, I was in the academy, and not in business, but if anything, it was worse. We of the university got access to the full spread of underlays, provided at the taxpayer's expense. We got copied and made into underlays ourselves, underlays which could be rented by the hour, or sold and wired in. And we got total access to Citycellular. Pure democracy, all at once, all inside your head. Mob rule. I knew I'd lost whatever originality—whatever *personality*—I'd had when, one day, I scanned a paper on the cell, found it interesting, but incomplete. Then I looked to see who the author was, and found out *I wrote the fucking thing*. That was when I knew I had to get out.

So I took the plunge, out of Citycellular, out of what I once believed was the only meaningful life a human could live. And I survived, me and my underlays. Hell, we *prospered*. Nobody inside me wants me to cash their chips in. I'd do it for them if they wanted, let them go back on the market. I run a monarchy, sure, but it's a constitutional one. But we've made our treaty, our separate peace, with Citycellular. We're free. Or as close to it as you can get these days.

"Just remember that for the next three weeks you're off Citycellular," I'd told Veronica and Murali that night. I picked out a ramen noodle with my knife and slurped it into my mouth. *Al dente. Perfecto.* "You are limp noodles in my hands."

"That's what we're paying you for," said Veronica.

She could have put it more nicely, but that was essentially correct. What I did for a living now was put other people through a controlled version of what I'd been through myself. Something akin to throwing babies out into a lake and telling them to swim. There were, on occasion, unfortunate drownings. Oh, I hadn't had a client actually *die* yet, but right now Murali was working on bettering my record on that score. He was not just panicking there on the cliff; he was experiencing a full-scale underlay insurrection.

When I was ten feet below him, Murali peeled. He fell about six feet, and his protection held, his careful technique paying off. I almost peeled off myself, trying to avoid being hit by his climbing boots. After the shudder of arrest from falling, he arced along the rock, trying to stop his motion with his hands, and losing some palm skin for his troubles. After a couple of pendulum swings, he stopped, and hung chest upward. He was grabbing for the nylon webbing from which he was suspended. I was scared that he would either jar his protection loose or manage to get a hand on his seat sling's carabiner and somehow click himself free of the webbing.

He was carrying on a furious conversation with himself, both aloud and over the radio.

"Oh fuck, oh God, oh *shit*."

"Shut the fuck up! Veronica *already* thinks I'm a fool."

"Put the past behind, concentrate on now. That's where solutions come from."

Each statement was in Murali's voice, but each was distinct and different in tone. There was a small lag between each, as if all of his underlays were fighting for cerebrum time.

I moved closer, found a crack and wedged a chock into it, and clicked myself in. I carefully reached upward.

"Murali, don't—"

He kicked my hand into the wall, then slammed his foot against it. I cursed under my breath, but squelched it on the radio. This was not the time for me to lose my temper.

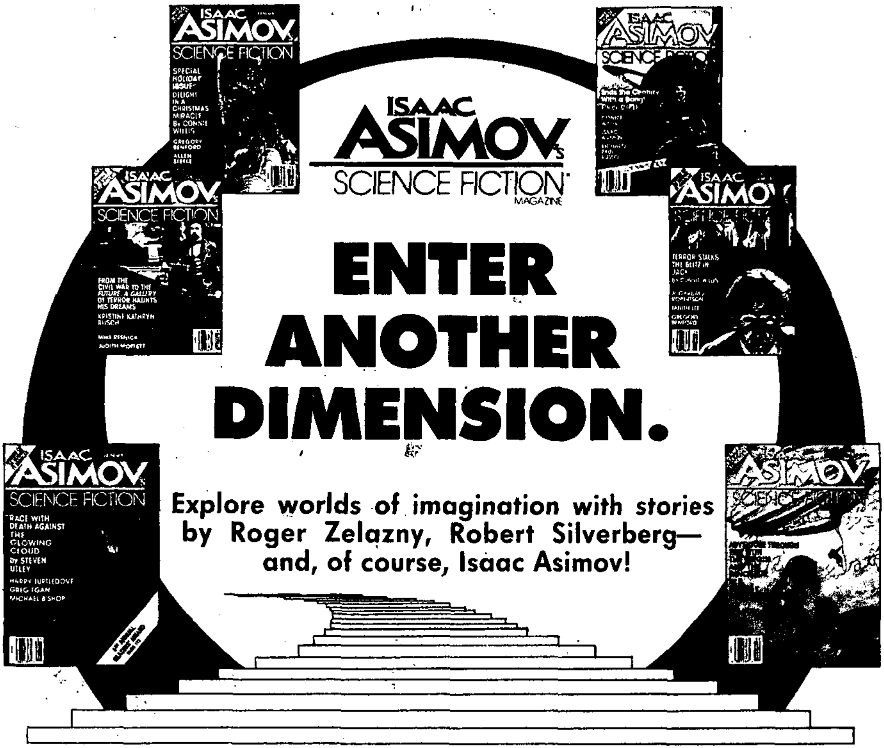
"Murali, you've got to calm down," I said. "I'm going to help you."

I can understand how he got his locking carabiner unscrewed. I *still* haven't figured out how he took his weight off of it enough to get the tubular webbing through the gate. That was a thing that wasn't supposed to happen. Built-in safety factor of the D-shaped carabiner. Right.

With a scream, Murali went freefall.

And I caught the fucker. I launched myself out and wrapped both arms around his skinny chest. Mark was screaming for me not to do it, but I turned him down and concentrated on the task. Somehow, my hastily placed protection held. Somehow, my arms held onto Murali. He banged into the rock, with me behind him. My arms took most of the blow. We hung together like mating spiders.

We were in what's known in game theory as "the prisoner's dilemma." I won't go into the esoterics, but the gist is that cooperative behavior is better than individual action. I knew that I'd better get some cooperation out of Murali soon, or else I'd lose my expedition license, and he'd lose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the chance to apologize to Veronica for his shortcomings. Murali was absolutely silent, breathing hard, as if all his underlays were too damn scared to make a suggestion. Typical committee mentality.

"Murali, you're going to have to get hold of the rock," I said.

Finally he squeaked an answer, in what had to be his own voice. "Yes."

"There's a good crack just above your right shoulder. See if you can work a hand jam with it."

Murali was back in charge, and, for all his timidity, at least he could *do* something. He made an acceptable jam.

"Now smear your foot and find a ledge."

He did it. And found a hold for the other foot and hand without me having to tell him to. Mark evaluated his positioning. Not the best, but if Murali didn't freak, he wouldn't peel again.

"Good," I said, finally taking a long breath now that some of the weight was off of my arms. "Now I want you to click your 'biner through the loop of my webbing. You're going to have to let go with one of your hands to do it."

"Oh, no," he said. His quiet, intense voice was coming back.

"You have to."

Slowly, he took the weight off one hand. That hand came away from the rock, trembling. I could feel Murali's whole body shaking against my chest.

"I'm going to come out from behind you and get beside you," I said. He was about to lose the pressure of my body pushing him in toward the rock. I knew that, physically, this didn't matter. I hoped he could handle it psychologically, though.

I found a hold and pulled myself gently to the side, separating body contact with him gingerly, as you would take a toy from a sleeping baby whom you didn't want to wake up.

As I moved, my webbing became accessible. He grabbed at it, missed, let out a stifled scream. He flailed for a moment. But he held onto his mind enough to keep one hand on the cliff. Then he reached for the webbing again, got it, and clicked himself in. As long as my chock held, he was safe.

Which meant I had to do a little free climbing once again. I unhooked and went to secure the protection and place more. It took me about ten minutes, but, when I was finished, I was pretty sure we weren't going to fall. During that time, Murali had been absolutely quiet. I came back down to him.

"If you think you can make it, it would be best to climb up to the ledge where you were belaying Veronica."

"Veronica," he said. It was almost a prayer.

"Can you make it?"

He shook his head, as if to clear it.

"I think so."

"Then go on up. I've rigged it so I can belay you from here."

Without another word, he climbed up to the ledge. His technique was very good. I followed him up, without asking for a belay.

Now this is when you will start thinking I'm crazy. But the way I can charge the prices I demand, the way I can get the success I do, is to push my clients beyond what they *believe* are their personal limits. Because those limits are actually the limits of their underlays. Underlays are behaviors and memory, not people. The real human underneath all the software can stretch a lot farther than his add-on programming. There was no reason why Murali couldn't climb the rest of this face. We would be careful and I would belay him. He was a good climber.

"Let's do the rest," I said. "Let's climb this fucker."

Murali looked at me, bewildered. I could just see his underlays kicking back in, rationalizing, quailing at the thought of their host's demise and their own destruction.

"Come on, Murali," I said. I was feeling good, capable, almost ecstatic. "You don't want to come to the end of your life and find out, when it's time to die, that you haven't lived."

"Thoreau," he said. Or maybe it was one of his underlays.

Shit, I thought, I wish I hadn't said that. Why did I say that? Because that's what people do, once you say a thing. They analyze it, they categorize it. A thing should be inside you, roped out into your arms and legs like nerves and arteries. It should never show, even a little, even its hind-parts. Because once a part of something shows, the part of it that you can speak, they take that for the whole thing. They think they've got your game figured out, and they're sure that it fits within *their* game, as a subset, a special case, a lesser component. They don't give you a chance.

Veronica had reached the top. She came rappelling down past us, about twenty feet away. She waved as she slid by. She didn't say anything, but I checked her radio. It was on. I'd be willing to bet it had been on from the moment I'd called out to her.

"I want to go down," said Murali.

"You can do it. You can climb this hill."

"I want to go down, please."

We went down.

Murali got to the bottom first. Veronica said not a thing to him as he unhitched. I touched down, and started to gather in rope. Veronica walked over to where I was standing.

She kissed me full on the mouth.

She turned to her husband.

"Idiot," she said.

So this was how it was going to be, I thought, as we walked back to camp. It had started off as a good trip. Both of them had seemed eager and bright, ready for their wilderness experience, ready to notch the Blue Ridge into their career-measuring sticks as they would a management seminar, a child, a promotion. They greatly reminded me of me, fifteen years ago. So fucking infested with underlays and bad philosophy that you expected them to crumble away at the touch like some rotten log. My job was to step on them, hard, bust away all the detritus. To pull what was still alive from under all that dead wood. To give the living things a goddamned menu and say: "Here. Here are your choices, sir and madam. You thought you had lost them, but they were merely misplaced. Bon appetit."

But I was losing that chance now. At least with Murali. The underlays were winning, the city was winning. I could feel little more than pity for the poor fellow, tinged with just a bit of hatred for what he'd just put me through. He *wasn't* all right, underneath it all. Sometimes you can give a person every benefit of the doubt, and there's just nothing there, you know. Just nothing.

And if there was, Veronica was doing her best to pound it into submission. She was a bitch, but she was a very effective bitch. I could see what she was after. Thirty-nine is a little old to still be an underling at some branch office. For whatever reason, Veronica had reached the apogee of her corporate parabola. She was poised there, as high as she could go—and she was comfortable there. The way she treated Murali was proof enough of that. I imagined she could do just about what she pleased at work and at home, and Murali knew it. She had a vested interest in Murali's failure. Had she been different when they'd gotten together in the first place? At this point, I found it difficult to give a shit.

We reached camp, and they sullenly began to get the food out for supper. I fired up the stove. Soon, I had a rice dish cooking. Veronica went into the woods to piss, and Murali came and sat beside me. He was fidgeting with his ring.

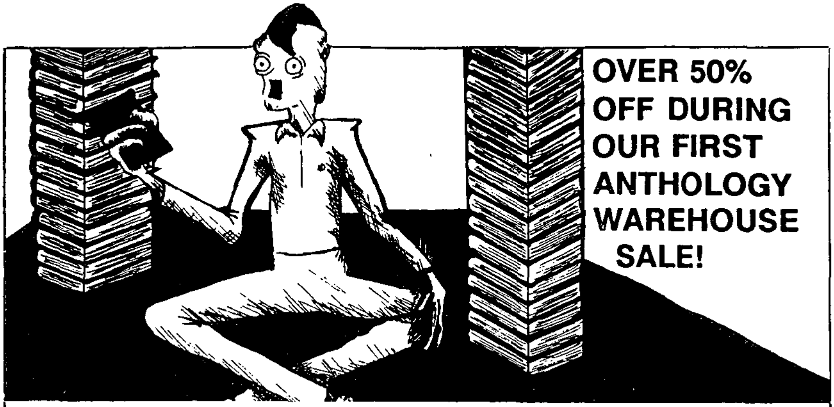
"I wish you wouldn't sleep with her," he said.

I looked up from stirring the pot. I tried to find his eyes, but could not. He kept looking down at his fingers. "Get a hold of yourself," I said.

He didn't say anything for a while. Veronica began crashing back toward camp. She always walked through underbrush as if she held it a personal grudge. Just before she got to camp, he finally spoke again.

"I really wish you wouldn't sleep with her."

"Christ," I said, and again tried to look him in the eye. But he got up and moved away.



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MCGA-1

I slept away from camp that night, out under the stars, but she found me anyway. I was awake, watching satellites. It's a hobby of mine, watching from afar this geosynchronous necklace around the world, every cell connected through a net of light and electricity to Citycellular, so that no matter where you are, your mind can flow out to the entire world, pushed and pulled by the tides of information, opinion, community, your being enhanced and continually redefined by your brushings up against the angel wings of collective human experience. That is, unless some old geezer makes you yank your jackcode from Citycellular and go stumbling through the woods unconnected—some geezer who says it's better for you to spend one month alone with your own thoughts than ten years as a cellhead.

I carry an extra-wide sleeping bag, because some of my clients "find themselves" in a big way while they're out in the forest with me, and want to express their delight in this discovery with the most intensity possible. Hell, it's always been part of the show. Pay your money—live out your fantasies with the Great White Hunter.

Veronica dropped her pants and blouse, and slid in almost noiselessly, with only the faint crackle and whip of nylon against skin. I started to whisper something, but she covered my mouth. Her hands were getting toughened. I liked that.

She moved against me with a practiced ease. How many others had there been? I wondered. He must know. Obviously he's guessed. Then her movement began to have its effect, and I ceased to think at all. She was a hard woman, muscled from gym workouts and bio-enhancements of various sorts. She'd picked up a week's worth of natural smells, though, so I could almost imagine her to be something I'd found in the woods. Or that had found me.

She was relentless, working me over. I suddenly discovered her mouth here or there, then she would move on, her hands following in the wake, squeezing, nails raking across my skin, always surprising. Arousing. Competent. Like an underlay. The hell with that. I turned over in the sleeping bag, over her, kissed my way down her breasts, her stomach. I kissed hard, pressing her down. At first she reacted strongly, then less so. I spread her legs and found her with my tongue. Finally, the tension started to leave her body. My hands were on her thighs, and I could feel the tension flowing away. But she wasn't surrendering. She was finding a kind of center, I think, maybe for the first time in a long while. Herself. I let her pull me up, felt her kiss herself from my lips. I slipped inside her.

Twice in one day, I thought, I've faced the prisoner's dilemma. Wordlessly, we cooperated.

She got up an hour before dawn. I was asleep, spent, and barely woke up when she left to go back to her husband.

Over breakfast, Murali confronted me.

"You did it, what I asked you not to."

Veronica snorted. She'd been pleasant since we'd gotten up that morning, no snide comments, no competitions to see who could have their gear ready to go quickest. Now the old Veronica started to seep back in.

"Better let it go, Murali," she said.

"Yes, let's do that," I said.

"Then you admit it?"

I just stared at him.

"Don't be a buffoon. You're already an idiot and a coward," Veronica said, deftly turning away just as Murali looked at her with a face full of hurt and misery.

"I think we'll do some bouldering today," I said. "I've got a climb I want to take you on tomorrow that's really hard, and I want you both to be ready."

"Don't want any repeats of *yesterday*," said Veronica. She stood up and went to strike their tent.

"She didn't zip the door when we went to bed last night," said Murali, to nobody in particular. "She wouldn't let me. Said that the mosquitoes weren't bad, and she liked the circulation."

"I think bouldering will be good for you," I said. "Build your confidence up. You're an excellent climber."

"The wind picked up and shook the door flap pretty good. It woke me up. She wasn't there."

The oatmeal was done, and I began dolloping it out into each of our metal cups.

"I guess it's my fault," he said. "All of them. She changed, and I never said anything. Just let it lie."

"If you want to call off the trip and go back in, we can," I said. "But if not, we have to get on with it. The decision is yours, Murali."

For the first time in a week and a day, he met my eyes firmly and completely.

"We'll do what you want," I said.

He seemed surprised, not angered, as if a new thought had suddenly struck him.

We bouldered hard, all day. Bouldering requires great skill and little courage. Murali was wonderful at it, better than Veronica, and, with practice, could easily be better than me. He claimed not to have a climber underlay, and I believed him. There was a naturalness in his movements that even I didn't have. I rely pretty heavily on Mark, and climb things to get to the top. People who boulder find all the joy in the climbing. I don't look down on them, except literally. Climbing philosophy is like an Escher print. You can look at it one way, then you can twist your brain and look at it another. Which is right? Both. Neither.

While Murali was working on a particularly hard pitch about eight feet off the ground, and I was spotting him, ready to ease him down if he slipped, I felt Veronica's nails against the outside of my hand. Murali was at the worst transition, and I wasn't going to take my eyes off of him. Her hand moved to my thigh, to my crotch. I shook my head, no. She caressed me lightly, through the thin covering of my climbing tights. And Murali peeled.

I caught him, and he came down hard on top of me. Veronica's hand got stuck between my legs, and she went down in the tangle. Murali didn't seem to notice her. He got back up and helped me up.

"I want to try that again," he said. "I can do it."

"Okay," I said, catching my breath. "Try it."

On the second attempt, he made it to the top of the boulder. He danced a little jig while I applauded. After a moment, Veronica joined in the clapping. He jumped the ten feet to the ground, rolled, and came up smiling. We went to another boulder.

You cannot predict what will change a human being. All you can do is use big words that are almost as empty as saying nothing at all: challenge, pain, trial, surprise. Who would have thought that seeing that skinny, brown man dance on a boulder would make me like him again, after he'd almost killed me? Who'd have thought that climbing barely ten feet off the ground would do more for his soul than scaling a two-hundred-foot cliff?

"Climbing is a game," Murali said, as we walked back to camp. "Like a logic problem."

"In a way," I said.

"You're wrong," said Veronica. "You climb to get to the top."

We were a lot alike, Veronica and me. But not deep down. I looked at her, and started imagining carving away her face with my lockblade. I cut and cut, and there kept being *more face*.

"What?" she said, noticing my stare.

"I agree with you," I said. "You climb to get to the top."

I leave my comrithm on at night, powered down, but not turned off. Sometimes I catch the edge of some cell-talk, but I never join in. I had my access codes erased years ago. I always tell my clients which frequency I keep a constant check on at night, and tell them not to use it unless it's an emergency. I was up late. My underlays were active, mulling over the previous night, thinking about the day ahead.

I let them each have their say. Mark was mostly drive and perfected technique. He admired it in others, whatever form it might take. He approved of Murali and Veronica. Sharon, though, hated Veronica, thought her crass, thought that Murali's climbing style was aesthetically beautiful, inspired. The others spoke, and I hung back, absorbing, trying not to think. Sometimes it was good to listen to your voices. Late at night, when nobody could get hurt because of it. It was difficult to make stupid mistakes while wrapped up in a sleeping bag. Difficult, but not impossible—Veronica called me up on the emergency frequency.

"I want to come there again," she said. And she sent a picture along with it. Of her. Naked. I didn't know she had the hardware for that—it was non-organic, and expensive. All I had was software for visual reception. Veronica had obviously spent some time in front of a mirror, memorizing how she looked. I felt an erection beginning.

"One per customer," I sent back, trying to put speed and terseness into the timbre of my reply.

"I'm coming over." Now the picture of her moved, touched itself. Reached toward me. She must have practiced this for a long time to achieve such fluidity in the animation. Her body moved with the grace of a good climber, tracing out a beautiful route up a rock face. But it was the competent, ferocious Veronica talking, not the one that had found herself last night. An underlay, I was fairly certain. I wondered if the underlay had persuaded Veronica to fuck me again to show me who was boss. Then I wondered whether Veronica had any choice in the matter at all. Of course, that was supposed to be impossible. Like a locking D-carabiner sliding right off the webbing.

It didn't matter. Respect is a funny thing; it seeps in at the strangest moments. A picture of Murali dancing around on top of the boulder wiped Veronica's erotic transmission from my mind.

"I won't be here," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes."

She was quiet for a long time.

"Don't bother," she finally said. "I won't come over, then."

I didn't say anything. It was time to go to sleep. I pulled the cover over my head and put my underlays to bed.

FADE IN

Looking Glass Knob, South Face. Day.
High angle along the face of the cliff. We move along with our stalwart heroes as they pick their way up a difficult pitch. Veronica is climbing now, with Murali belaying. We are three-hundred-feet up, just below them. All that work with weights and machines is paying off for Veronica, as she muscles her way underneath an overhang. For a moment, she's practically horizontal, and we cut to

Murali, who is watching her carefully, playing out rope as she needs it. His face is loose, but not blank. He seems in a state of pure doing, his actions perfectly expressing his being. Then, he smiles, but tenses up just the slightest bit, and we cut to

Veronica as she makes a move like a gymnast and swings one arm and a shoulder around the overhang's edge. She finds a hold on the top surface. In the wink of an eye, her torso twists and she pulls her legs over, smearing her feet expertly. They also find holds. And she is on top of the overhang. But just for a moment. She's overestimated her strength, and doesn't have the balance she needs. With a little scream, she totters, then peels away, and cut to

Murali, who sets his feet, checks the rope, gets ready to absorb her weight, and cut to

Veronica as she falls past the highest chock. She hasn't placed it tightly enough and it pulls away. The second one holds and she jerks to a stop and bangs into the cliff wall. Cut to

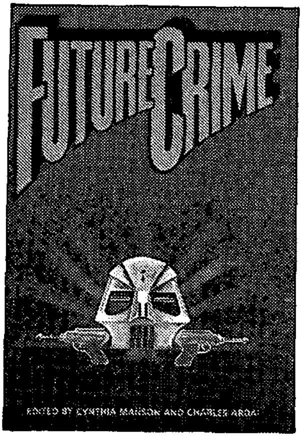
Murali, who takes the strain with a flinch and a grunt. But he smoothly breaks her fall, and back to

Veronica, who quickly finds a purchase on the cliff. She's more embarrassed than bruised. Almost immediately, she is on the radio, assuring us that she is all right, that she will try it again. But this time, she finds an easier route, to the side of the overhang. With an effort, she finally gets on top of it, and sits down. She calls to Murali, breathlessly, that she is off-belay. Then she sits, admiring the view.

Big angle on the view. The Blue Ridge, in all of its late spring glory. Folded mountains, like wrinkles on a giant green bedspread, left behind after an intense fuck between gravity and friction. God's country—but the God of open air, not the god of chainlink fences.

Sharon wanted another angle on Veronica, so I put my binoculars back into my daypack, and worked my way to the side of Murali, then up past him, self-belaying myself along the way. I would jack my memory-bank into an editor and dump my footage back at the cabin. Sharon would have at it for a day, splicing together the video which I mailed to the client. Part of the price of the trip included pictures of your adventures, and Sharon wouldn't let me do a half-assed job with it.

Veronica was anchoring in, getting set to belay Murali.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MCFA-2

"I wouldn't try that overhang if I were you," she told him.

Murali looked it over.

"I think I can make it," he said. "What do you think, Francis?"

I thought Murali was probably right. He'd been climbing well all morning, much better than Veronica. She was having trouble with her temper, and was grabbing and kicking the rock as if it were a bothersome child that needed to be taught a lesson.

I was beginning to revise my assessment of Veronica, downward. Her underlays weren't really under control. They were just complacent. Now something was upsetting the status quo.

He husband was turning into a human being.

"I say go for it, Murali."

"Thoreau, huh? Make it matter that you were born? Even if it's just to yourself?"

"Something like that. Don't talk about it. Just do it."

I started to get my binoculars out of the daypack, so I could use the zoom lenses and get both close-ups of his climb, and some wider angles which showed just how precarious a position he'd be in.

"I was listening last night, you know," he said.

"What?"

"To you two."

"How *dare* you?" said Veronica with vehemence. Then, after a pause. "How dare you not *tell* me?"

Murali ignored her. "I appreciate what you did," he said to me.

"Yes, well—"

"Better not to talk about it, eh?"

"Something like that."

He called out and radioed to Veronica that he was climbing, then started up toward the overhang. Veronica was livid, but speechless. I could see her face turning red under her tan, even from where I was anchored in, thirty or so feet away.

"Goddamn you, Murali!" she thought over the radio.

Still, he did not answer.

"I'll divorce you, you bastard!"

Murali replied in his quietest voice. "And do what? And go where?"

"Bosmia takes care of its own."

"As far as your career is concerned, I *am* Bosmia."

"You fucker!"

"Folks," I broke in. "Let's talk about this later."

"Yes," said Murali, with an air of finality. Veronica was furiously silent.

I just watched. Murali wouldn't need the video. For most of my clients, the video was essential. They longed for a reminder of the one time in their lives when they had only themselves to blame if they failed, and had no choice but to praise themselves if they succeeded—of the one time in their lives when they were forced to be free. I had a feeling that, with Murali, freedom was going to be a permanent state. Even if he couldn't make the proper move, and had to go around the easy way, it wouldn't be from lack of trying.

He was up to the overhang in no time. He skirted up the vertical face like a cat shooting up a tree. He deftly placed protection along the way in a zig-zag line. When he got below the overhang, he studied the rock.

"What if I go over the top legs first?" he said.

I referred it to Mark.

"Depends on your positioning when you get there."

"I think I can work it right."

He started up. He progressed under the overhang slowly and carefully. After a little while, he was nearly upside down, clinging to the rock like a fly clings to a ceiling. And as he progressed, he was turning around so that, when he was ready for his final move, his legs would be at the edge of the overhang. It was brilliant climbing.

He paused for a moment, contemplating that final move. I saw an amazing tableau. Murali was directly underneath his wife, hanging upside down. Above him, separated from him by a two-foot layer of rock, Veronica sat, holding the belay. She could not see Murali at all. She was directly on top of him.

Then Murali made the move. He worked his hands and feet in concert, extremely quickly, so that he covered only a little space with each movement. There was a lot of movement though. He worked his legs around the edge of the overhang and found a good crack on its side into which he jammed his hands. For an instant, he was facing partially downward, with three-hundred-feet of empty air between him and the ground. Then he curled his legs over the edge of the overhang, got his torso half over.

The hard part was done. His center of gravity was resting solidly on the horizontal rock. All he had to do was take his hands out of the crack they were jammed in, and quickly mantle on to the top of the overhang.

He almost made it. It was that goddamned wedding ring. Once again, I thought, he'd forgotten—or hadn't wanted to take it off. It caught in the crack, and, for a split second, he couldn't pull free. That was time enough to lose his balance. He flipped backward, turning a somersault off of the overhang.

He didn't say a word. He didn't call out to Veronica.

Still his ring and hand were stuck in the crack. His full weight came onto the trapped hand, and there was a sickening snap as his wrist twisted backward and broke. The fist jam held for a moment, then came loose. All that held Murali to the face of the rock was his ring finger, caught in some crevasse in the rock's crazed surface. I realized that he must have had that ring on all the time, for years, his knuckle growing bigger and bonier as he got older. He'd disregarded my warnings not because he didn't want to take it off, but because he couldn't.

I made myself react.

"Veronica," I called. "He's falling!"

I started toward Murali. This time, there was no chance to reach him.

Then Murali yelled. It was a roar of pain, yes, but it was modulated—as if he knew he had to cry out, but was going to do it with the most control possible. His finger separated from his hand at the ring, and Murali came free of the rock.

He fell well past his protection and, for a moment, I felt relief. It had held. Then I realized that Murali was not stopping. *Veronica was not stopping him.* I looked up at her.

The rope was whizzing around her waist, through her carabiner, like a living thing. Her face was going through an amazing series of changes. Hurt, rage, concentration, anger, dazed nothingness—they all flashed across her features, unbelievably quickly. At the end, there was something like a smile on her face, as she watched the rope play out.

The end of the rope came up, around her, and fell away into the abyss, as a snake will glide into its hole when threatened. The rope end fell past me, and I made a grab for it. I caught it.

As I tightened my hand, the nylon burned into my flesh. I felt it dig deep, cut through tendons, strike bone. There were no more muscle connections in my hand. I could not hold on.

Murali fell two hundred more feet. He didn't scream on the way down. Nothing came over the radio. He did not make a sound. When he hit, it sounded like distant thunder.

Veronica finally screamed. For a long, long time. Then the scream turned into something else, a kind of whine. Something very sick. Then she was quiet.

I just clung to the rock and nursed my hand. The sky was brindling over, and the land below was a crazy quilt of cloudshadow and sunlight.

"Help me," whispered Veronica. I only heard it over the radio. "Help me, Francis."

I watched the land below me change. Light scattered and gathered like glass pieces in a kaleidoscope.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll say it was an accident."

"What do you mean?" She was still whispering, as if she and I were part of some conspiracy. Perhaps we had been.

"You can go back on the cell, back to your career. That will be punishment enough."

"You can't think that *I*—"

"No, Veronica didn't kill him. I don't know *which* of you killed him."

I cleaned my chock out from the wall. I didn't have enough rope for a rappel. I surveyed the route, then found a hold and took a step down. My hand started to throb like hell when I brushed it against the rock.

"Francis!" Now she was screaming. I couldn't do anything about her voice, but I could sure turn the fucking radio off.

"Francis, don't leave me!"

It would be a hard descent, but all I really needed were three solid points of contact.●

GREAT CARS OF THE MAYANS

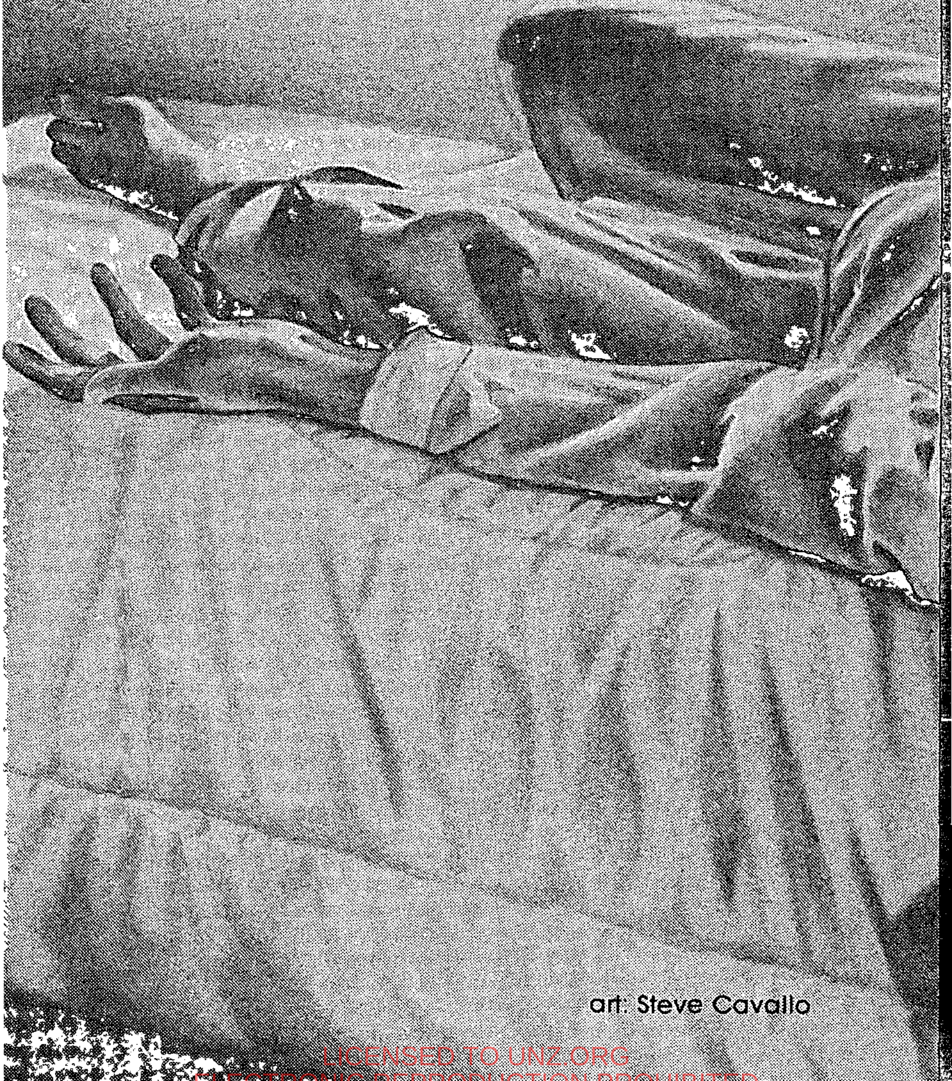
Tough lianas for fan belts
immense glyphed calendar stones for wheels
the model IX-4 was their prototype
birthed from those Mayan garages
deep in the lightless, fumy pyramids

Ix Henrifo discovered the engine fueled
from distillations of corn, jalapeñoes and guano
he retired with his Brujo UX, the first and last
muscle car to boast a hundred llama-power

Assembly lines can still be seen in the jungles
Copan, Uxmal, Palenque, Chichén Itzá, Tikal
overgrown tributes to mass production
to the darling young princes who set tradition
by sacrificing their honor, and sometimes lives
as they lumbered around limestone raceways
kicking dust into the Quetzalcoatl-green skies

—Roger Dutcher and Robert Frazier

Since 1986, Rand B. Lee has worked as a
full-time psychic consultant in Santa Fe, New Mexico,
where he lives with his husky-wolf hybrid, Moon-Pie.
Mr. Lee has just completed his first book,
Essences: How to Discover and Fulfill Your Life-Purpose,
a personality-analysis system based on Tarot archetypes.
The author would like to dedicate this story
to Stuart "Alex" Lucker, his late research partner.



art: Steve Cavallo

by Rand B. Lee

LETTING GO OF WAVERLEY

Gary found Waverley lying on the red bed with her head tilted back, her long blonde hair dashed across the blue silk pillows, her mouth slightly open. She was dressed in her yoga outfit: off-white slubby cotton tunic, drawstring trousers to match. Her feet were bare and her body was very cold and stiff. Gary had known Waverley was dead from the moment he had put his hand to the knob of the bedroom door and said, "Honey, we have a client in an hour," known it at that moment of vacant stillness. *Her* bedroom door, not theirs, though it had been theirs once, long before and briefly.

He touched her, though he knew he should not. He buried his head in her cold chest; he pulled at her cold face with his hands. The silent part of him that knew things knew with a certainty that her body was empty of her, because he could feel her around him like a cloud of light—no, subtler, like a shift in the arrangement of reality about the bed. And he could feel her Others around him, too, their waveform characteristically calm and compassionate, but with a difference. They were no longer the presences he had grown to know over the years of leading Waverley into deep trance for her clients, her television audiences, her Other Love Weekends, for the thousands upon thousands who had come to identify her entranced voice with the deep meaning of things. They were deeper, richer, broader somehow. *She's been added to them*, he thought. He let his body go through its motions of grief until it was time to tell Delores to call the police.

The medical examiner was very kind, improbably tactful for a professional man of science who did not believe in all this channeling bullshit but who knew the far edge of sorrow when he saw it. He had lost his brother, he explained to Gary. "It's never easy," he said.

"What happened to her?" Gary croaked.

"It's too early to tell for sure, Mr. Malcolm. A cerebral hemorrhage is my guess, but I'd like to see an autopsy done." He consulted a paper. "You are listed as Ms. Angelus's next of kin?"

"I was her husband," Gary said. "I'll authorize the autopsy."

"Fine, fine." The look in the medical examiner's eye said what his mouth did not: *If you were married, why the separate bedrooms? Why so little mention of the fact in the media? Why no kids? Some breakdown of Love, here, Mr. Malcolm, here in the house that Love built?* And then the people with the stretcher were coming out of Waverley's room.

Her face was covered with a sheet, but a strand of her hair, shining gold, glinted from beneath the fabric. Gary found a pair of manicure scissors in his hand without quite knowing how they had gotten there. Under the watchful gaze of the waiting police, he leaned over and snipped a lock of hair away from the scalp of the corpse. Delores took the scissors from him, but did not take the hair.

They bore the dead woman out the white-pillared front door, out across the wide green flower-bedded lawn, and loaded it, with some effort, into the back of an ambulance. Gary signed some papers without taking his eyes off the van, not until it did the job for him, vanishing around a corner of the long driveway, bound for City Hospital and the morgue. Long after the medical examiner and the police had left, he was still standing there, holding the strands of hair in his fingers, looking out at the empty bend in the drive.

There is a tunnel, and she is flying down it, toward a bright light that grows brighter and brighter. Around her, there is joy: welcome home, welcome home, welcome. And the music lifts and laves her like the currents off Hawaii. And close behind the wave of Love, another wave follows, propagating with increasing power: the shrieking wail of the heart abandoned.

The news hit the wire services like a child falling to pavement: FAMOUS MEDIUM DIES; FUNERAL HELD MONDAY. Letters and telegrams flooded WaverColm Ministries's uptown office. Dowdy little Sandra Dworkin, important at last, answered mail and talked to reporters, reading from a prepared statement. The OtherLove Centers in Seattle, Santa Fe, Virginia Beach, and Key West hung white crepe paper on all their windows and doors and limousines. For the funeral, held at the Maui center, Gary led a group meditation for three thousand people from all over the world, amidst fountains of flowers and swelling Bach. He did it without knowing how he was doing it, and scarcely knowing why; he just did it, or something did it through him, the words coming and the energy from the audience embracing him.

During the service, he felt for Waverley. She was there, and so were her Others, but they seemed far out of his reach. Not so for the audience; afterward, he was thronged with people claiming that Waverley had touched their hearts intimately through the meditation. "She was so clear." "She told me I had to follow my inner voice." "She told me she was at peace." "She loves you." Finally, his rage was so great that he had to excuse himself, and let John, the Sikh security chief, do the clearing out.

Over the weeks that followed, Gary holed up in the Sonoma house where Waverley had died. Friends dropped by regularly to see how he was doing, bringing with them every symbol of love current in Northern California: crystals, medicine shields, pyramids, smudge-sticks, energy-balancing templates, offers of Reiki or Ro-Hun or applied kinesiology or Inner Attunement sessions, chakra-opening tea mixtures, chicken soup made from hand-fed poultry, organic vegetables, and natural spring water. A number of people, both genders, offered to sleep with him. The inevitable hardy mutant strain of reporterial virus managed to elude the house immune defenses, namely John the Sikh and Delores, but was stopped cold by Mu, Gary's white wolf-hybrid, who guarded the upstairs hallway from intrusion with a savagery wholly uncharacteristic of his genus. *People* called; so did *Oprah*. Mu was unimpressed.

George Simpson, Gary and Waverley's agent, *was* impressed. "You've got to think of the future, Gary," he said over the phone. He had tried to say this in person, but Mu had not allowed it. "If you don't make another public appearance, people are going to say that all the things Waverley and you have been teaching all these years are hogwash. They're looking to you for hope, Gary."

"Later, George," said Gary softly. "Later." In fact, Gary found "later" difficult to imagine. The worst of it was that he felt imprisoned by the present, a present almost wholly circumscribed by the past he and Waverley had shared. In her death-room, his room now, he lay on the bed for hours, staring at scrapbooks, listening to Others tapes. Once he put on a sweater of hers he had saved, just to smell the perfume lingering in it. For the first week, Delores left trays at the closed bedroom door; he seldom touched them. The second week, he found himself able to wobble downstairs, take a shower, change clothes. But downstairs reality—the ringing phones, the smell of Delores's cooking, the parlor without *her* in it at the piano—all this hurt his eyes, like a too-bright light; he could only take it ten or fifteen minutes at a time before he had to flee upstairs again, Mu at his heels, into the dark embrace of the shuttered bedroom.

Waverley, where are you? Why did you leave me? What do I do now? Can I come, too?

No answer.

The third day of the third week after Waverley's death, Gary descended to find Delores standing at the kitchen door with a folded newspaper clutched in her left fist. The knuckles on the fist were much paler than the surrounding dark skin. "Delores, what is it?"

"You shouldn't see this, Gary," said Delores, but she handed the paper to him anyway. Unfolding it, he was trapped by the headline, which had been underscored by a lurid red smear from Delores's marking pen. It ran:

FAMED PSYCHIC TO SPEAK FROM BEYOND GRAVE

Through the blood-beat in Gary's head, Delores said, "My sister Rose brought this by today. We've had forty calls. Reporters, too, of course, but John got rid of all of them this time. And your agent's been trying to get a hold of you."

Gary read:

> *Waverley Angelus, world-famous channeler who died January 27 at her home in Sonoma, California, plans to return with a message of hope for the world of the living, according to Sandra Dworkin, secretary to Miss Angelus and longtime friend of the Angelus family.*

"Did George know anything about this?" asked Gary.

"I asked him. He said no."

"What does Sandra say? Has she confirmed the article?"

"Your agent says so. I haven't talked to her. I didn't think it was my place."

"What makes Sandra think Waverley is coming back?"

Delores's eyes struck sparks in the air. "Sandra says Waverley is going to speak through *her!*"

Gary blinked. "I see," he said. He lowered the paper, but took it with him into his study. He punched George's private number and waited for someone to answer the sounding tones. He and Waverley and the Others had counseled many women and more than a few men suffering from the aftereffects of childhood sexual abuse, but not until that moment had Gary realized, *This is what rape must feel like, a little.* The rage that welled up in him was so numbing that it took George's, "Who is it, dammit?" to jar him out of it.

"George, it's me. It's me, George."

"Thank God! Gare, we've got big trouble. Did you get my messages?"

"Delores showed me the papers, George. What do you know about this?"

"It's over, Gary."

"Uh, what do you mean, George?"

"I mean, it's over. She's done it. The little bitch has done it already. Last night Sandra held a channeling session for some select representatives of the national press."

"This is hard to believe, George."

"Believe it, buddy. The usual gab-rags were there, too late to get it into the editions that hit the stands today, but that wouldn't have been so bad. She invited Katy and Doc from *Metaphysics Magazine* and Sir Daniel Jones from the Confederation of Light. I just got off the phone with them and Doc and Dan-boy think it's all genuine." Gary was silent. Wondering whether he had made himself clear, the agent added, "Gary, Doc Abraham and Daniel Jones think Sandra's *really* channeling Waverley."

"I understand, George." Gary closed his eyes as tightly as he could, making red come. “Any doubters there? What about Katy? Did she buy it?”

“No way, thank Christ. She played it cool, though, said how ‘interesting’ it all was and how it ‘bore further study.’ She read Doc the royal riot act in the car on the way home.”

“How do you know, George?”

“What do you mean?”

“How do you know she read Doc the riot act?” Gary paused. “You weren’t there, were you, George?”

“What the hell kind of thing is that to say? Of course I wasn’t there! I just found out about it this morning!”

“Why?” snapped Gary. He could not hold in his anger any longer; it shook his voice. “How did a thing like this get past you, George? How did Sandra get away with holding press conferences and channeling sessions without you hearing about it?”

George said swiftly, “She must have slipped them notes on WaverColm stationery when she was working late answering all that damn correspondence. No excuses, Gary; I should have known. I didn’t. And I think it’s high time the two of us gave little Sandy a talking-to.”

The men breathed at one another. Suddenly, Gary began to cry, the helpless kind of crying that kittens and small infants do. George began crooning to him in a low, odd, tender voice, until his voice and Gary’s anguish filled the world, and Delores came and put the phone on the hook and took Gary up to bed.

The planes of existence are seven in number, whispered the Others. *Their names are the Plane of Matter; the Plane of Mind; the Plane of Planning; the Plane of Dreaming; the Plane of Pure Potential; the Plane of Light and Sound; and the Plane of the Other Self. These planes are not to be thought of as tiers, but as the faces of a seven-sided form which is your true body.*

Your matter-body is focused on the Plane of Matter. Your mind is focused on the Plane of Mind when you are awake, then expands into the other planes during the body’s sleep. This is an expansion of attention, a movement of notice, you understand, not a movement through space and time.

When you die, you release your matter-body completely, no longer calling it by your name, giving it back to the Earth from which it was created. And the first nonphysical reality of which you are aware after death is the Plane of Mind, that which is sometimes called the "astral" plane. It is that plane which mirrors your Physical Reality most closely.

Ghosts dwell there, until the living let them go, and they the living.

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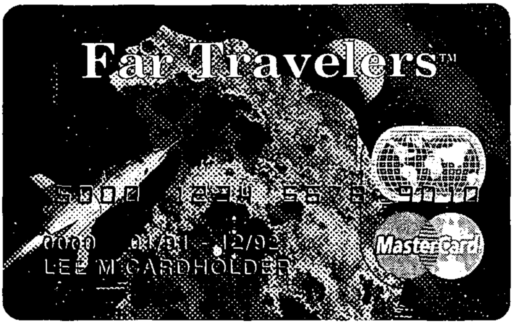

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He dreamed that night that Waverley was calling to him from behind the mirror in the parlor, her golden hair floating and her mouth open, as he had seen it last. When he woke up, to piercing sunshine, he knew that she was in trouble.

It was the day of the showdown with Sandra, and he thought of Waverley as he drove to the WaverColm offices in the lemon-yellow Porsche, thought of her as she had been the day they had first met, fifteen years before. He had not thought a woman's hair could be that color naturally, and for years he assumed she used dyes. (She did not.) Her contactless irises were nearly gentian-blue; her skin was perfect for a Caucasian's, like some China lily's. The jumpsuit she wore left just enough to the imagination. Around her neck she had placed a gold chain from which a purple amethyst crystal dangled, pointing to her mysteries. She had stood out from the others in the psychic development group like a butterfly in a bowl of Wheaties.

She had seemed oblivious to the effect she was having on entities of both genders round about her. Her entire attention was focused on the two psychics up front, who were explaining to the class the layers of the human aura. Gary, a semi-skeptic prowling for silly season material to please his editors at the Santa Fe *Express*, got a bad case of truth-chills the moment he laid eyes on her.

Over vegetarian fajitas after class, Gary had grilled Waverley on her psychic experiences. Improbably, she was Greek. Her father's last name was "Angelou;" she had Latinized it to "Angelus" because, she said, "an angelus is a kind of bell," and she liked bells. She'd lived in Santa Fe four months. Someone back East had told her that New Mexico was on a power nexus, and that people who went there either got their lives utterly transformed or everything fell apart and they had to go back home again. She was thirty, never married, and Washington University in Saint Louis, Missouri, had awarded her a Bachelor's degree in Psychology.

Gary was so conscious of feeling intellectually superior to the beauty across the table that he overcompensated, posing his questions more bluntly than usual. Weren't New Agers basically just a bunch of kooks trying to escape into a dressed-up version of nineteenth century spiritualism? Well, she replied, taking her time, there *was* a strong anti-intellectual element in the New Age movement, something it shared with the Fundamentalist Christian tradition, but she didn't think that intuition and reason had to be enemies. She didn't believe in the supernatural, but in a wider definition of Nature. Rather than term them "kooks," she preferred to consider New Agers people attempting to develop a personal mythology in which *natural* was not limited to *physical.*

How did she know that her automatic writing was the expression of spirit-guides, unbodied minds located outside her own unconscious, rather than disassociation or brain dysfunction? She replied that she did not think that "located" was a meaningful term when used to describe the nonphysical; and anyway, did it matter whether or not a source of useful information was outside her or inside her, as long as it communicated with her?

Gary shifted gears. Wasn't the notion of precognition—the ability to sense events before they occurred in spacetime—a damning concept? Didn't it require a deterministic view of reality? This puzzled her. She replied that most serious students of metaphysics agreed that the future is not static but fluid, varying according to the free wills of everyone involved in creating it. Precognition, she said, was the ability to sense *probability* lines, not certainties. Nothing is written in stone.

By this juncture there was such an overtly sensual element to the sparring that when Gary asked, "But what about UFOs?," both of them burst out laughing. Waverley admitted that she believed in the extraterrestrial origins of UFOs because it comforted her to believe it. Besides, she said, her belief or nonbelief in UFOs would not affect their objective existence one way or another. The persistent, unsubstantiated rumors of extraterrestrial contact seemed to her to be equivalent to the persistent, unsubstantiated rumors of a mysterious continent to the West of the ancient Roman world. She saw no reason to give up her belief in the probability of extraterrestrial intelligence until all of space was explored and it had been ruled unequivocally incorrect.

By the end of the evening, Gary knew that he had to see Waverley again. Fifteen years later, he still had his first recording of her voice, made that night on his little reporter's pocket recorder, made before the Others started speaking through her; before the psychic fairs and the conference circuit; before the money, before the worldwide fame, before WaverColm, before the OtherLove Centers, before he lost her to the Light.

She is caught in mid-flight. Around her, Physical Reality flows like a dream, image upon image, shoals of thoughts flitting here and there like silver fish, images: Gary, presenting her with Mu, an eight-week old cub, smelly, wriggling, all tongue and needle-teeth; Sandra Dworkin weeping over black-edged letters; George their soon-to-be agent smiling artificially at his first Others session; the midnight razor in bereaved Gary's hand, hovering, undecided. She is not cut off from the love of her Others, or from her Greater Self, but she feels stretched between planes, attenuated, and try as she might, she cannot complete her transition. Her human loved ones' longing holds her like a sharp grey chain.

Frightened—because this is the Plane of Mind, and she has not yet separated entirely from ego—she calls for help.

When Gary arrived at the office building, the lobby was mobbed with press, who popped flashes at him all the way to his private elevator. Kinsfolk to John the Sikh were waiting when the lift stopped rising and its doors opened; seeing who he was, they relaxed and parted to let him into the WaverColm offices.

George the agent had gotten there before him. He was standing in all his bulk, drinking a wine cooler in Gary's private office, and watching Sandra Dworkin weep. Sandra was sitting in a chair opposite Gary's cherrywood desk. She was dressed in a linen leisure suit so like the yoga clothing Waverley had died in that Gary nearly turned around and walked back out. Instead, he went around to his side of the desk, put up his briefcase, stood with his fists knuckling the desktop, and said, "Sandy, I'm upset."

"I know," said Sandra, between sobs. "I've upset everybody." She stirred feebly. "Do you want some coffee?" Despite Gary and Waverley's constant assurance that they were capable of making themselves coffee, Sandra had always insisted upon doing it for them. When Gary did not reply, she abandoned the notion of resuming her Fifties secretarial role, and wrung her polished nails. "Stop looking at me that way, Gare. I know you must think I'm a Judas. I know you *both* do." She hurled a look at George the agent, who was opening a new bottle of cooler. "But I can't help what you think. She was there. I saw her. I *felt* her. She came to me. She *was* there."

"Bullhonk," said George.

"George," said Gary softly. George moved away from the desk, across the room to the great amethyst geode, which stood dreaming on its pedestal under the skylight. "Sandra," said Gary, "look at me." He perched on his desk as close to her as he could manage without flinching. "Look at me, Sandy." She did so, her mascara running, devastation and adoration mingling in the gaze she turned upon him. With a shock of recognition, he wondered how long she had been in love with him and Waverley.

He said, "Sandy, I remember how excited I was when Waverley first channeled the Others, back in Santa Fe. I couldn't think of anything else. I was so hyper about it I ran around trying to convince everybody I respected to come listen to her, see for themselves, hear for themselves. So I know what you must have felt when it happened to you, and why you asked Doc and Katy and Sir Daniel to your session."

Sandra smiled unbelievingly. "You under*stand?*"

"Yes. And I understand why you didn't tell me, or George."

She burst into tears again. "I was so afraid," she said. "Nothing like this had ever happened to me! Waverley always said I was psychic—strongly psychic, a latent, she said—but I hadn't cleared my chakras fully yet. And I thought, when it happened, oh not yet, I'm not ready, I'm not good enough, but it didn't matter; *she* was ready." Sandra moved to grip his thigh; desperately, he willed her to stop, and to his amazement, she stopped. "Gare, I didn't want to raise your hopes. I wanted to be sure it *was* her. I needed someone who would be able to tell, and who—who wouldn't be too hurt if it was all a lie."

"Tell me what happened, Sandra. The first time Waverley contacted you and told you she wanted to speak through you." He leaned back on the desk and waited, conscious of the tension in George's shoulders.

The story came out Sandra-style, in bits and pieces and between sobs, but it was clear that she was enjoying herself. The gist of it was that she had been in her bathroom. It was about ten o'clock on a Friday evening, and she had come home exhausted from working late at the office answering the mail. She was depressed, she said, worried about the fate of WaverColm now that Waverley had "crossed over"; pained in her soul, deeply pained, because of the sadness in the letters she had been reading. ("They miss her so much," she pointed out.)

She had bathed and changed into her best robe, and was just starting to put some cream on her face when her reflection in the mirror changed into Waverley's. "Don't be alarmed, Sandy," Waverley had said to her from the mirror. "I have some good news for you. There's an important message to be delivered to the Physical Plane from the Other Side, and I want you to deliver it for me, because you're a clear channel."

("Her eyes were on fire, Gary," Sandra said.)

Sandra had protested her unworthiness. Waverley had insisted upon her worthiness. This had gone on for a bit, until finally the Angelus had burst into merry laughter, "filling my bathroom with the sound of golden bells," said Sandra. Waverley had told her not to be afraid; she herself would help her. "I'll join my essence with yours in such a way that your uniqueness will not be violated," said Waverley. "I'll give you the words to speak. But you have to agree to it. And if you say no, some other way will be found to bring through the information."

Then, reportedly, Waverley had waited in the mirror, waited while Sandra Dworkin's heart had skipped several beats within her new-bathed breast, and the universe had hung, poised. And finally Sandra had said, "Whatever you want, Waverley. Do to me whatever you want," and the bathroom had exploded into light of indescribable loveliness.

"When I woke up, it was the next day," said Sandra earnestly. "I was in bed; I didn't know how I'd gotten there. And I didn't remember anything after I said, 'Yes.' That's how it started, Gary, it truly is."

"What happened next, Sandra?" Gary asked.

"Well, I just knew she wanted to talk to somebody really badly."

"I see," said Gary. "So you asked the Abrahams, Sir Daniel, and representatives of certain, ah, publications to sit in on a session so you could check the objective validity of the experience."

Sandra burst into tears a third time. "Oh, Gary, I'm so sorry! I know it was premature, and that I've hurt you so much. But I couldn't help myself." Her chin tightened. "It was *necessary*. She made me promise to be brave, to—"

"No way!" Gary had been thinking it; George came out and said it. From across the room, he turned to face them and pointed a finger. "No way, Sandy. Waverley didn't *make* you do shit. Waverley wouldn't *make* you do anything. She wasn't the sort of person in life to force people and she wouldn't be that sort of person in afterlife." His voice was controlled, but his tanned jowly face was livid.

"George," said Gary.

"I didn't mean—" faltered the secretary.

"You mousy little bitch, I loved her, too, you know that?" George had Sandra by the shoulders, was lifting her, shaking her. He was a tall man, big, and something essential to him was starting to crack and crumble. Sandra began to writhe, and Gary's "*Stop it*," stopped them both.

George released Sandra; she fell back with a thump onto her padded seat. Breathing very hard, the agent repeated, "I loved her, too. And you could no more channel Angel than a moose could sing soprano at the Met." He vibrated the glass in the door when he slammed it behind him.

Gary and Sandra looked at one another. The air left in the room by George's departure felt clearer, as though he had catalyzed a shift in all of them. Gary found himself inexpressibly tired. He smiled and forced himself to touch Sandra's plump wrist, briefly. He said to her, " 'A prophet is without honor in his own country.' " She frowned, and when he let go of her wrist, she held it as though he had hurt her. He swung his butt free of the desktop. "We've all been under a lot of pressure, Sandra. I've decided to bring in someone to help you handle the correspondence load."

"You're firing me."

"Don't be silly. I'm focusing your energies on a different project, that's all. Sandra," he said, holding her gaze, "I don't think I'm quite—ready—to hear Waverley channeled by anybody else. Her death is too fresh for me. But I'm interested in her message. I'd like you to write down everything she says to you."

"Write it?" said Sandra in a gravelly voice.

"Automatic writing. Remember the Ministries course you took last year? Just ask her to *write* through you for now; tell her we're not quite ready to *hear* her. I'm sure she'll understand. Date the entries to the hour and turn them in at the end of each week. I'll want to read every bit of the information that comes through. Will you do that for me, until I have time to—sort things out?"

Sandra cocked her head. "Yes," she said.

"Yes, you agree?"

"Yes, she agrees." The woman's plain face shook into a smile. "Oh, Gary, thank you. Thank you from *both* of us."

And he fled, following in George's wake, fled from the glint of gold lurking in the depths of Sandra Dworkin's eyes.

In the Plane of Dreaming, whispered the Others, *the experiences necessary to growth are selected. In the Plane of Planning, these themes are given physical and temporal setting. Sets are designed, roles are cast, and blocking is coordinated. There are no major entrances that are not agreed upon in advance of the action of the play. It is the same with the exits. However spontaneous, uncontrolled, surprising or tragic they may appear to the audience, or even to the actors themselves while in the throes of creative self-expression, all deaths are suicides.*

He fled to a corner of Peru he had always intended to share with Waverley and somehow never had. He had felt guilty about this often enough. She had always shared her treasures with him: on tour, on trips, at bazaars, in shops, at parties, even after their truly married, bed-sharing days had long passed; she had made a habit of grabbing his arm, dragging him from his corner, thrusting him forward into the raw light of some beauty she had just discovered. She was always seeing beauty where he could see none. She had seen it in Sandra Dworkin, who had joined them soon after Waverley's first Christmas special; she had seen it in George the agent, whom Gary had initially typed as bad-novel material; she had seen it in him.

And she was not possessive of her treasures. She frequently gave them away, or put them back where she had found them, as though she had feared her contemplation and enjoyment of them might blight, in the end, their uniqueness.

"Look," said his guide, in English. Gary, huddled in his parka against the mountain cold, stared through the cloud of his breath into the moon-silver. In the valley, a mist not of breath was forming.

"I see fog," said Gary, in reputable Spanish.

"The hillwife is walking," said the guide. "Look."

Gary peered again. The mist seemed to undulate, stretch out under the moon, and there, sure enough, was a woman's form, hunched, plodding uphill. At first she appeared tiny, insubstantial; then he blinked to see her more clearly and she had shot up to twelve feet tall. The bundle on her back was a vast brooding. "What is it?" said Gary. "A ghost?" He thought of Waverley drowning in the mirror.

The guide, the one he always used when he ducked down south to escape something, laughed lightly. "She is a hillwife, not a ghost. Ghosts scare easily; yah!" His breath plumed from betel-stained teeth. "Hillwife. Very much other."

It was obviously an apparition, a kind of mirage magnified by water droplets in the mountain fog, poor cousin of the numinous illusions which mountaineers called "glories." The hillwife continued to trudge, dogged and shadowy, up the slope. Gary wondered how far away the real woman was whose drudgery the moonlight and mist were deifying. He glanced at his watch; the hillwife had been walking for two minutes. "What does it mean?" he asked his guide.

The man shrugged and grinned, but played with the crucifix around his neck. "Bad for a pregnant woman," he said. "If she sees the hillwife, she often loses the baby." He paused. "For a man, who knows? Maybe a message."

"What sort of message?" asked Gary. He scrutinized the glory. Was there something else, lower and leggier, following after it?

"The old folks say that it is we who are the shadows, not the hillwives," said his guide. "The hillwives cast us, themselves seen dense and little. What's the matter?" For Gary had risen to his feet, face bleached whiter than the fog, and before the Peruvian could stop him, had started scrambling down the trail to the valley.

"Come on!" cried Gary, turning and beckoning, frantically. "I've got to get back. Right away!"

"But you have just arrived," pointed out the guide, who could see his commissions evaporating.

"Look!" And Gary pointed. The guide looked. The hillwife was reaching the summit of the mountain, and behind her, stretching upturned muzzle to the winds, a shadow-wolf gleamed white as old snow.

An answer comes, and she is standing on an orange plain backed by Crayola-purple mountains, sharply etched. Before her, twin Sphinxes lie on their forepaws. They have the faces of Egyptian women, and heavy orange wings. There is nothing else on the plain, and it all feels so physical that she knows her shackles have grown stronger, not weaker. She reaches for her Others, and they are there, so she decides there is nothing to fear. She projects her thoughts to the Sphinxes: What is this non-place?

What comes between Plane of Matter and Plane of Planning? they reply. Whose number is two and color is orange?

The Plane of Mind, she answers. They grin with their eyes. She asks, Who is it that keeps me here, denying me expansion?

The Sphinxes show their teeth. They ask, who is not a goddess, above coercion?

She nods to herself. Then I have forged my own shackles in response to the longing of the Plane of Matter, she says. Instantly, the plain wavers, becomes translucent, and she feels the dream-sweep of the tunnel start to pull her again toward the light. The plain, however, does not vanish, and she addresses the Sphinxes once more. Who needs me, she asks, whom have I not settled with, that I am Earthbound?

The Sphinxes lash their orange tails. Which of the four is your heart's dearest? they ask. Babe or Mother, Lover or Devourer? Which is the focus for the world's desire? Which denies own godhood and worships yours?

She cries out, and for the first time notices the gigantic figures chained to the purple mountains. One has the marks of nails in palms and feet; one, an odd topknot and an eternal smile. Swarms of black things, like distant buzzards, rise and settle upon them, feeding. She screams again.

When he got back to Sonoma, his desk was flooded with appeals. The Cetacean Fund wanted to know if Waverley's death had changed his plans to speak at their annual fundraiser; Save the Children wanted to know if he was going to continue Waverley's policy of giving 5 percent of WaverColm's net to their organization. There were calls in from the OtherLove Centers in Seattle and Key West; their local directional boards had met and decided that detaching from WaverColm and incorporating as OtherLove *churches* would be most in keeping with Waverley's implicit wishes. Would he let them use Waverley's name and teaching materials? *Time* was running a Waverley Angelus retrospective, calling her the most potent force in American religion since Billy Graham; they wanted to know what he made of the phenomenon that Waverley's death had tripled public interest in her life and channelings?

He could not find Mu anywhere. "Where's my dog?" he said to Delores. She shrugged helplessly, taken by surprise. Not waiting for her words, he sprinted the stairs, three at a time. Mu was not patrolling the hallway. He penetrated the off-limits quarter, turning lights on as he went. "Mu!" he called, thinking, *Oh God, please no*. He got to the bedroom Waverley had died in and pushed open the door.

It was in shambles. The bedclothes, which he had refused to let Delores change, were shredded. Animal feces weighed the blue silk pillows, mixed with down from their ripped innards. The dresser, oak with satinwood inlay, had been overturned. The altar he had placed atop it, decorated lovingly with all the most precious, intimate things that Waverley had given him and he had given her, was a sad, smashed jumble. "Mu?" he whispered. The door to the great bright bathroom was ajar. He went through it and stopped.

The wolfdog was standing in the middle of the bathroom with blood dripping out of his nose and mouth. On the floor beside him lay the open razor-blade box, cracked wide. It had fallen from the sink-ledge, easily wolf-muzzle height; he had taken it out of the medicine cabinet, contemplating suicide in a warm tub, Roman-style, and he had not been able to touch it since for fear of what he might really do, this time. "Mu?" said Gary. The wolf wagged its tail, and licked up the final razorblade from the floor.

The Porsche flew to the vet's, but there was absolutely nothing they could do.

Whispered the Others, *The human is not native to the Plane of Matter, unlike the beasts, who are its native children. In the Great Differentiation, certain entities selected to vibrate at the density of that which you would call the matter continuum; others did not.*

Humans are united entities: matter and nonmatter wed for the purpose of bringing into the nonphysical understanding of the physical. The beasts already have an understanding of eternity. For them, death is conscious, and even though their bodies may struggle to maintain a linearity of cellular existence, their minds know that nothing marks their end. For them, death is the resolution of life into its natural state: dust to dust, light to light, like snow melting and returning as mist to the sky.

At the kitchen table, Gary said to George and Delores, "It's the four of us: you two, Sandra, and I. We were the core. We're the focus for the power of the mass consciousness, which is holding Waverley in the Plane of Mind."

"What about John?" said Delores. John the Sikh was sipping bancha at the window, watching for the secretary's headlights in the dusk. John grunted, and Gary grinned tiredly.

"John has his family," he said. "They're his center. Waverley was ours."

George was silent, staring into his teacup as though it were a crystal ball, or an alien artifact. Delores said, "I can't believe God would let Waverley be stuck like that. It's not fair."

"God lets babies be napalmed," pointed out George.

"It's not a question of what God would allow," snapped Gary. "You're not separate from God. Neither are the babies or the napalm. It's a question of experience necessary for growth on all levels. Waverley left the Physical Reality because she had successfully completed her work here. From our viewpoint, maybe she was *too* successful. She—and we with her—had set up a huge teaching organization with her as the guru."

"She wasn't a guru!" exclaimed Delores, shocked. "She *never* claimed any authority! Neither did the Others."

"Nonetheless," said Gary, "that is how she is perceived by millions: their spokesperson for the Greater Self."

"That's not our fault, Gare," said George, low in his throat.

"Fault? No," said Gary. "Not fault. But it is our doing." He touched George's hand. "Remember that night, when you came over for your third Others session, in Santa Fe? Remember what you said to us?"

"I was being an agent," said George.

"You were more than that. You said, 'This is the hottest thing since Buddha and the fig tree or Jesus at the wedding.' Remember, George? And we laughed with you, because we were so excited, and we wanted the Others' message of peace and hope and personal empowerment to spread all over the world."

"What's wrong with that?" demanded Delores.

"It's not a question of wrong or right," said Gary. "It's a question of what energy does when it's released. We wanted Waverley's work to flood the planet with light, and it has. And that very fact is what's keeping her from moving on to freedom."

"It won't last, Gare." George gave him a bleary look. "Never does. Marketing research, you know? In a year, there'll be somebody else with a torch in her hand, and the crowd'll follow her instead of Waverley. We've reached our peak."

"Have we?" asked Gary. "The Edgar Cayce people haven't reached their peak, and he's been dead a hell of a lot longer than two months. Christian Science is still going strong, and Mary Baker Eddy died generations ago." He rubbed his temples. "Mu decided me, smashing my altar to the Goddess Waverley, taking death into himself. A graphic demonstration. We've got to let her go before it's too late."

George gaped. "A religion. That's what you're afraid of. Waverley becoming a religion. Like Christ or Buddha."

"She would *never—*" began Delores.

"Neither did they," said Gary softly. "But their disciples did. And now where are they? Maybe not so free as you'd suppose."

From the window, John the Sikh said, "There's Miss Dworkin now." He put down his teacup and exited.

"What do we do?" said George shortly.

"Dissolve WaverColm. Disband the OtherLove centers, refuse them use of Waverley's name or materials, give the holdings to charity." George looked sick. "Or maybe the reverse. Charge everybody three times more for things, so they start thinking of us all as money-grubbing bastards and fall out of love with us. I'm not sure; we'll have to study it." Gary stood up. "One thing I'm sure of. Whatever happens in Sandy's séance, we've got to cut our ties to Waverley, each one of us, individually, completely, and permanently."

"Oh, how nice the house looks!" Sandra Dworkin's voice, too loud, preceded her into the kitchen. She scuttled through the door followed by an impassive John. She had had her hair done for the occasion in a predictably unbecoming style, and she was dressed in the same linen suit Gary had come to loathe. "Oh, Delores—Mrs. Quintana"—correcting herself, not assuming too much, not yet, it wasn't her place, yet—"it's so good to see you! My!" Sandra beamed tensely, artificially poised, like a rich woman asking for directions from ghetto mechanics. "Hi, Gare!" A light touch on his hand, withdrawn reluctantly. "So here I am!"

She waited, beaming, looking at nothing. *Accept me, believe in me, use me, please.*

Gary cleared his throat. "This is difficult for all of us, Sandra."

"I know." Surprisingly, she seemed to. "But everything will turn out *wonderfully*, you'll see."

"Let's get to it," growled George. He got up and led the way through the cool airy fragrant oak-and-crystal house into the conservatory. Four chairs had been set up amidst the greenery; in the center sat the amethyst geode on its stand, conveyed from the WaverColm office by John's minions. Gary directed Sandra to the north; he sat opposite her, southward. Delores and George sat west and east respectively. John stood near the light-switch, the extent of his participation in the proceedings to follow.

Sandra, very nervous, chattered on about how pretty the room was; how nice it was to be here; how wonderful it was going to be for all of them; how she could just feel Waverley's energy all around her. Gary, weathering this, kept roaming in memory: back to the first public Angelus channeling, on Bob Chavez's Santa Fe radio show; to their first TV gig in Denver; to their first conference, in Sedona; their first European tour, when they both got diarrhea (and the Others did not). *This is no first anything*, Gary reminded himself firmly. *We are not supporting Sandra's strategy for self-aggrandizement. We are creating a* last *thing, tonight. We are letting go of Waverley.*

He said, "John, you can dim the lights now." The lights dimmed and the room turned midnight green, purple where the one finger-spot touched the amethyst cluster. John left the room to attend the watch. It was not late enough in the evening for the moon to have climbed very high; the lawn lights glimmered through the pachysandra leaves around them.

"Oh," said Sandra, "I hope you all won't be too disappointed." The near dark seemed to amplify her chirping beyond endurance. "Just relax," said Gary, willed Gary. "Just relax."

They sat in stillness for a bit, George the agent breathing heavily in the dark and Delores Quintana stiff with silent prayer. Then Gary began to speak. He pretended it was the meditation group he had led back in Santa Fe, those first years, all of them so young and open, so comfortable with one another and their lack of fame. "Relax your feet," he said to the three of them. "Let your foot muscles completely relax into the warm floor. Breathe normally." The sounds of the night began to make themselves known. "Breathe in the warm, calming light from the heart of the amethyst, up into your body, filling every cell." *Relax*, he willed. *Relax*.

As she always did when attempting meditation, Delores began filling her mind with nonsense. Would the organic turkeys be defrosted in time for the Sunday dinner? They were so scrawny, you needed two of them, big chickens were all they were and six times the price. Would Rose remember the extra candles for the side altar at St. Jude's? Would Angel mind having a Catholic priest pray for the rest of her soul? "Lighter," said Gary softly, "lighter and looser and freer. Relax."

George the agent thought, *I never should have taken them on as clients in the first place. One look at her, though, who could help it? So incredibly godawful breathtakingly gorgeous. Made me a bundle, too, she did; cut off my legs and call me Shorty!* The gun felt very heavy in his jacket pocket, although it was very tiny; his wife's. "Lighter and freer," said Gary. "You are relaxing completely now, from the soles of your feet all the way up to your neck."

And Sandra: *Come on come on come on come on; where are you?* The bubble of hysteria she had kept imprisoned in her gut all day was threatening to break out. *Oh, Waverley, come on come on, goddamn it, you were there, I could feel you, where are you now? Don't fail me; you promised you wouldn't; you promised in the bathroom I would find my beauty and greatness, oh God, I never wanted anything so much please!*

Outside in the gatehouse, John the Sikh watched the moon rise and resisted the temptation to scratch under his turban. He was fifty-one and built like a steel armature. He had never gotten fat, unlike many of his kinsmen, and he did not take his vows more seriously than he took his heart, which was one of the reasons he would probably not rise higher in the ranks than he had. That suited him fine. He liked Gary, had not liked Waverley much; he had found her difficult to trust. It was not, he reflected, that she was a whore or a fake or a snob or a dilettante. She had simply never felt quite *there* to him. She had always seemed like a butterfly, lighting on a flower for the pleasure of the moment, drinking deeply of it, committed to the flower, and as committed to leaving it for another when she had drunk her fill. His heart always told him to do his duty and defend the innocent. What her heart told her had always been opaque to him.

He missed Mu. Thinking of the sitters in the conservatory, he said aloud, "They're all fucked up." He grinned at the moon. She knew. She was the Ripper Away of Veils, who delivered herself of the truth every month, and she was near to the full. "Shalom," he saluted her.

Then the conservatory roof exploded.

Glass and plants spewed skyward and rained down, slashing and bruising the turf beneath them. There were wailings, like those of women on a battlefield, and a few shots. Something on the other side of reality was being pulled into spacetime, something too big for the restrictions of linearity; John the Sikh screamed as his insides tried to come out of him. He had been raped once, in prison when he was seventeen; that had been nothing compared to this. *What are those idiots trying to do?* he thought wildly. Then he saw the Woman.

She was rising, up and up and up, on a column of white fire, growing as She rose. She had wings above and wings below, and four faces with their mouths open. All the mouths were speaking with the sounds of bells and thunder. John screamed a second time. The lawn seemed to scream with him, grass protesting invasion by its utter grassness as John was protesting invasion by Divinity.

It was the shots that broke the Sikh from his agony and moved his legs forward. Shots he understood, was equipped to deal with. Dodging flying pachysandra, John forced his way across the howling lawn to the conservatory and thrust himself within.

Noise stopped. He was standing, not at the door to the conservatory, but at another door entirely. Before him lay a little girl's old-fashioned nursery, trimmed with lace and pink things. Delores Quintana, the housekeeper, sat on a pink bed holding a little pink Waverley Angelus on her lap. "My dear, my darling, my sweet feather," crooned Delores, crushing the child against her breasts. He was, John realized, *inside* Delores Quintana; the smell, feel, energy of her filled the room, surrounding him. *A vision, then,* thought the Sikh, and put his hand to his knife.

There was a sickening sugar scent in the air. Through the nursery window, John spied one of the faces of the giantess, big as the full moon, mouthing *Help me! Help me!* at him. The baby Waverley gasped, pushed futilely against Delores's mammaries, struggled like one whose breath was going out of her, whose heart was turning blue. "My sweet feather," crooned Delores, and met John's eyes. She snarled.

He had no time to think about it. His knife was out and up and down and up and down. He pulled the baby free. Delores Quintana said, "Thank you," and there was another door.

He went through it, and found himself in a long stone hall lit with torches. George Simpson's heavy aura filled the chamber. At the end of the room, in front of a leonine fireplace, a tumbled mass of silks and furs supported two intertwining forms, a man and a girl. As John the Sikh stepped forward, over flagstones, men-at-arms appeared from nowhere, brandishing dark swords. A tall mullioned window crashed open; the second face of the Woman framed itself in it. *Help me!* She cried. John leaped for the ceiling. He sailed over the heads of the men-at-arms and hit the flagstones in front of the shuddering furs.

The man was eating the girl. Girl she was, about fifteen; wrapped in his arms, she could not escape the ravening of his jaws, gulping fingers, forearms, shoulders, tearing hunks from her living neck. The girl, blonde hair coiling, had one vivid blue eye left with which to shoot John appeal. The Devourer was lost in his feast and did not seem to notice him at all.

It took John many knife-strokes this time, and some coals from the fire. When he was done, there was another door.

He went through it and started to fall. Cliff-face flashed by him; he grabbed, and his hands caught tree-roots. He slammed against bare rock and hung, breathless, for a few moments. Painfully, he hauled himself up the cliffside and over the edge, where he lay sprawled.

Gritty grass defaced the promontory. Leafless trees spiked the gunmetal sky. The land glowed unhealthily, as though something had sucked honest life out of it and left a mask of life behind in its place. Only a small hill in the near distance looked normal, its earth a wholesome pinkish-brown. Walking toward it, he noticed two things almost at once: first, that a small figure stood at the hill's foot, tied to it by some rope or chain; and second, that it was no hill at all, but a monstrous baby with fat piggy limbs set in a hummocky trunk. "Mama!" the infant roared, and shook the cliff. "Mama!"

Knife in hand, John ran forward. An emaciated Waverley flinched at his approach. There was no mistaking the Babe's resemblance to Sandra Dworkin; and what John had called a "rope" was an umbilical cord, the thickness of his arm, running from Waverley's shrunken vagina to the infant's crater of a navel. Thick fluids pulsed through the cord, and with every pulse, Waverley seemed to weaken further and the countryside to sicken more deeply. He was in Sandra Dworkin's mind, now, a somewhat less willing mind than the others; the air pushed back at him; soil turned to mire under his boots. *This is no time for ambivalence, Miss Dworkin,* John the Sikh thought. He did not have to look behind him to know that somewhere, in the clouds above the cliff, the third face of the giantess was calling for his aid.

He reached the Waverley crone, and struck out with his knife at the umbilicus. A shock like electricity spun the weapon from his hand, flattening him. The cord reared and flexed, like a snake maddened. Infant

Sandra roared, and the cord snapped around John's knife-arm, holding it in a vise.

"She is too strong," whimpered Waverley. "A mighty latent, as I had guessed. The others have helped you sever their ties to me, but she?" Waverley looked up at the bloated Sandra. "She thinks I am life to her. She may never let me go."

Help me, Sandra, thought John the Sikh. *Help me.* Babe roared. *You have more than you can possibly need. She has nothing more to give you.* "Mama!" shrieked Sandra, but the umbilicus relaxed for an instant, and an instant was all that John the Sikh required. "Goodbye," he said to the crone, and catching Waverley in the crook of his arm, he neatly snapped her neck. And there was another door.

"Honey, I'm home," called Gary. Waverley's answering, "Here!," led him to the rose garden. The summer light was peculiarly clear, making every drop of dew stand out on the rose leaves. Waverley was wearing her primrose gardening-dress, sun-hat shading her golden forehead. She looked up at him with too-blue eyes. "Good day?" she inquired.

"The best. Slater gave me my promotion. I am now on City Desk, officially as of this morning."

Waverley sprang to her feet and threw her arms around him. He could smell her skin through the thin cotton. Her tongue found his, and they drank one another for a long while, till Gary pushed her away, reluctantly. "I've got more news," he said, with the air of one saving the best for last. He took out the heavy cream envelope with its distinctive embossing. Waverley put her hands to her lips. He nodded. "It's true," he said. "They gave it to me. The big P, doll. The ceremony's soon."

"Because of the Others piece?" she exclaimed. "The piece you did on me?" He laughed. Squealing, she tore the envelope from his hands, opened it in a fever of pride and joy for him, and thus for them. And the fury that rose up in him at that moment was so powerful that he had to fold his arms and step back to ensure that he would not strike her.

Because this wasn't Waverley. Even as he admitted it, the substance of the garden seemed to waver a trifle. The woman looked like Waverley and sounded like Waverley, but it was not she. *This is Waverley as I wished she had been,* he thought. *Available, pliant, mine. Centered on me. And that she never was.* His bitterness amazed him, then alarmed him. He had thought it cleared years before.

The thought-form of his wife was frozen in place, sun-hat tilted over the Pulitzer notification. He said to the garden, "The anger I'm feeling can't be explained in terms of this heterosexist fantasy alone. Take me through to the next level. I'm ready."

He was elsewhere. It was not a garden; it was an office. Waverley was in a white linen suit, hair pinned back. They were facing one another over her rosewood and ebony inlay *escritoire*. On the wall, tigers leaped with toucans in an Indian print. *The old office*, Gary thought. *Her old office*. Dread struggled beneath his layers of rage. *Not this*, he thought. *Not this!*

She was holding a letter in her hand, not the Pulitzer envelope of the garden sequence, but a white Number 10 envelope addressed by hand in heavy black ink. Gary had just come into her office, had just handed the letter to her, had just said, "Sandra put this in my box by mistake," had just seen her face recognize the handwriting instantaneously, had just known, then, what he had felt for some months and had not dared to ask her. "I read it," he heard himself say (*again*).

"Well," she said (*again*). She met his appalled stare with a cool and wistful one, as though he were an old photograph of someone she had known, briefly, in her childhood. "There's no help for it, Gary. I can't be what you want me to be. I thought I could; I was wrong. I realize that now."

"But why George?" Gary demanded (*again*), "George of all people?" "Because he needed me," Waverley replied (*again*), "and I needed him, his energy, his connection" (*again*). She placed the letter on her inlaid table-top parallel to the edge facing Gary. And then she said the awful thing (*again, but he had not thought of it in years, had covered it with layer and layer of holiness and hard work, thinking it was dealt with simply because it was intellectually understood, but here it was again, bright and hard-edged as a knife*): "I guess monogamy doesn't work for me in the traditional sense. When someone needs that connection with the Heart of Love, and it feels like a harmony between us, I just can't turn my back on them." She smiled, compassionate and terrible as the Divine Mother. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way about George and me, but perhaps it's for the best. I still love you and I still want us to work together. Whether we continue in an official marriage or not, the work must go on. Will you stay?"

Again. And the words Gary was beginning to utter stuck in his mouth. He had been about to say what he had said then, "Fine, fine, okay, fine," followed by a stumbling away out of her office in shock and a quick, massive burying of all feeling. His motives? To be close to her however she would allow it; to be close to the Others however she would allow it; not to lose the Dream, the specialness of the miracle their road together had represented for him. He had sat with her before audiences of hundreds (they had not swelled to thousands yet), watching her channel the Others to the upturned, adoring faces, and had thought, *Of all of you, she chose me to sit at her right hand.*

But now Gary looked into Waverley's goddess-eyes and said, "No, that's not acceptable. Goodbye," and turned away, and as he did so he began to weep, weeping not for Waverley—never for Waverley, he saw—but for himself and the years he had spent worshipping one who worshipped nothing time could touch. And there was a door, and he went through it; and the office walls faded while the tigers and the toucans danced; and the fourth face of the woman abandoned itself to joyous release; and the orange plain shattered into a million pieces.

The rescue workers said they had never seen anything like it: the entire mansion turned to a pile, three acres of landscaping blasted back to Hurricane Chester, and the five survivors sitting there in the space where the conservatory had been without a scratch on them anywhere. For Gary, it had been like coming back from sleep. He recalled his visions vividly, but had only a dim memory of the pillar of fire and the rain of conservatory glass. Then he thought, *shots*, and came wider awake. Medics, fussing, told him to be still. "Was anyone hurt?" he demanded. "John?" For it was John the Sikh he remembered, vaguely, running through all of their dreams, and also, somehow, struggling with George the agent over a firing pistol.

John, rewrapping his turban, grinned into sight. "Right here, boss. That was quite a show." He brought his seamed face close to Gary's. "Are you okay? You were the only one I couldn't get to. The door led back here."

"I had to do it myself, John," Gary said. He looked past the Sikh to George, who sat huddled in the grass, his big shoulders shaking with grief. "What happened?"

"You mean the gun? Nothing to it," said John. He grinned again. "Your agent brought one along just in case. Seems he thought Miss Dworkin was the culprit. He was going to shoot her if we couldn't find some other way to—you know—send Miss Angelus on." John frowned. "But it seems to me that wouldn't have worked."

"You're right, it wouldn't have," said Gary. "It was all of us, not just Sandra. All of us," he added, "except you."

"What do you mean?" asked the Sikh.

"You were the only one of the inner circle of WaverColm who wasn't attached to Waverley," said Gary calmly. "The only one who wasn't in love with her and her Others." John began to nod, comprehending. "That's how you could help us. There was nothing between the two of you that needed to be cleared, so you could add your strength to hers and ours and help us all do what we wanted to do but feared we couldn't."

"Goodness *gracious* me!" It was Sandra Dworkin, making an elaborate show of coming to. Her hair was a mess and her make-up scoured, and Gary was startled to see the real beauty in her face beginning to peek through. "I feel *wonderful*," Sandra declared to the bearded medic attending her. "So *alive*." Then, ridiculously, flicking bird-glances at the four WaverColms, "Was the séance a success?" George said nothing, still immersed in aftershock, but John barked once and Delores Quintana smiled, a trifle sadly.

Gary nodded to Sandra. "She's free," he said. "And so are we."

"What in hell happened here?" demanded Gary's medic. "Anybody remember?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask Miss Dworkin that," said Gary. Sandra brightened further at the promise of new attention. "My late wife said she could be a very talented psychic, if only she'd clear her chakras."

Then he began to laugh, quietly, with relief; then all of them began to laugh, even George, even Sandra Dworkin; and the hills skipped like lambs, and the mountains clapped their hands to keep time. The Others were laughing, too, in a pleasure that went on forever and ever, but they were used to this.●

LIFE IN THE BELT

Life in the belt is tight
the saying goes.
It is tough to keep your pants up
when power, air and food
devour all your pay and keep you thin.
Debt eats the pre-profit advance,
which seemed so huge.
No matter. Your children will be rich.
Profits will flow like water.
The consortium talks like that.
The only things that flow
are ambition and life,
the little water is hard as stone.
The duty rosters fill with new names,
taking the place of those who suddenly
lost their future profit to collect disability,
or whose family now has a death benefit,
inadequate to fill a void colder than cash.
They do not live here, those who run the consortium.
Life in the belt is for those anxious to leave the Earth.
As we once were; hoping to turn this small belt
of debris into a necklace of gems
circling the sun.
Technology does not change
the story of frontiers much,
the benefits of your work are hidden
in the future.
Few get rich, and always, it seems, the wrong ones,
in spite of the dreams.
Yet humanity gains one more foothold,
takes one more step along the journey
of competition.

—Roger Dutcher

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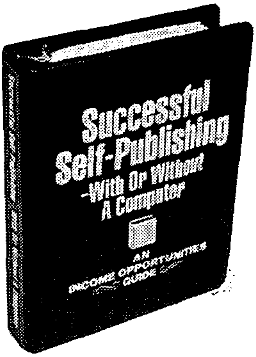
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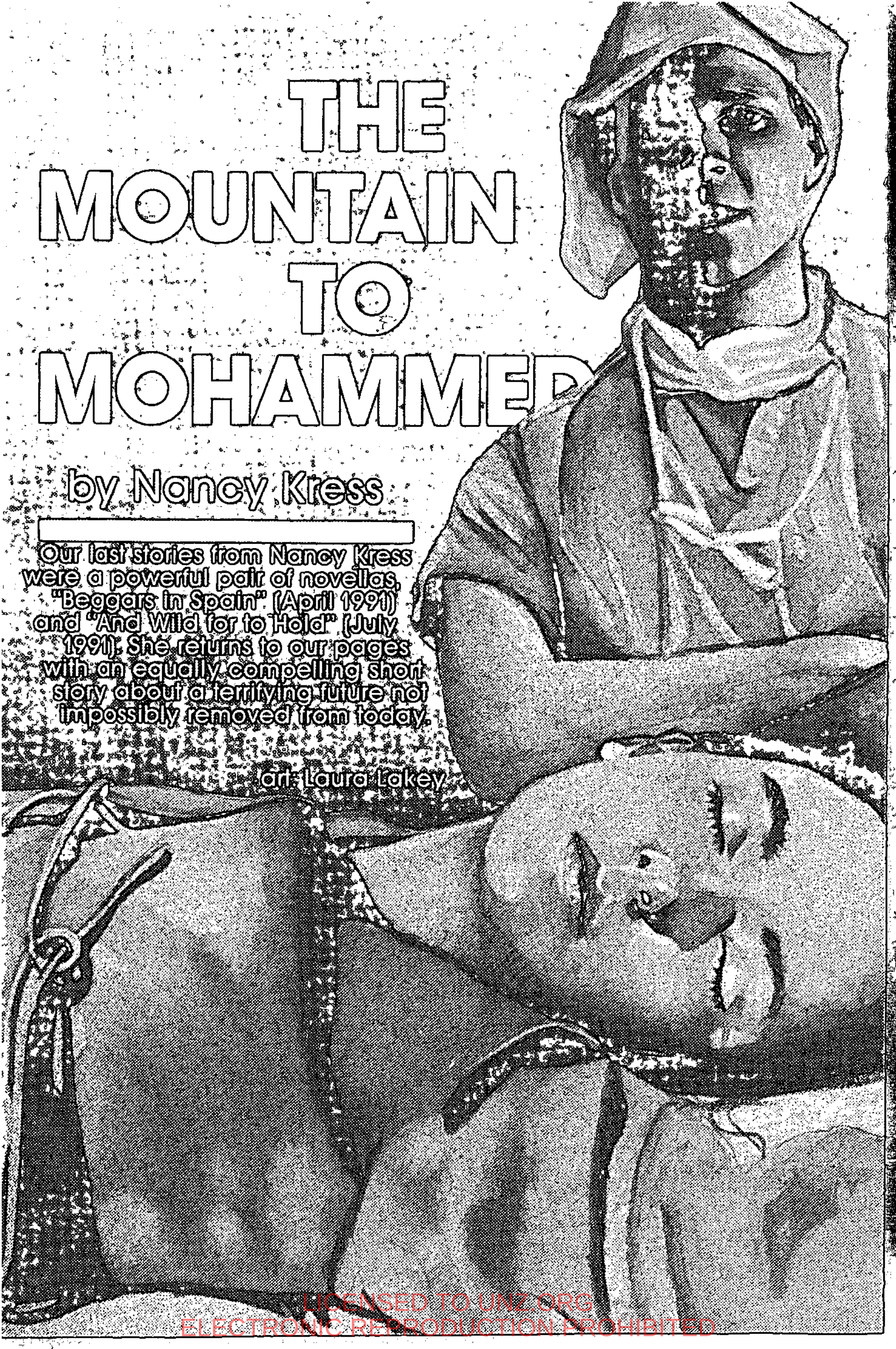
THE MOUNTAIN TO MOHAMMED

by Nancy Kress

Our last stories from Nancy Kress were a powerful pair of novellas, "Beggars in Spain" (April 1991) and "And Wild for to Hold" (July 1991). She returns to our pages with an equally compelling short story about a terrifying future not impossibly removed from today.

art: Laura Lakey



"A person gives money to the physician.
Maybe he will be healed.
Maybe he will not be healed."
—The Talmud

When the security buzzer sounded, Dr. Jesse Randall was playing *go* against his computer. Haruo Kaneko, his roommate at Downstate Medical, had taught him the game. So far nineteen shiny black and white stones lay on the grid under the scanner field. Jesse frowned; the computer had a clear shot at surrounding an empty space in two moves, and he couldn't see how to stop it. The buzzer made him jump.

Anne? But she was on duty at the hospital until one. Or maybe he remembered her rotation wrong. . . .

Eagerly he crossed the small living room to the security screen. It wasn't Anne. Three stories below a man stood on the street, staring into the monitor. He was slight and fair, dressed in jeans and frayed jacket with a knit cap pulled low on his head. The bottoms of his ears were red with cold.

"Yes?" Jesse said.

"Dr. Randall?" The voice was low and rough.

"Yes."

"Could you come down here a minute to talk to me?"

"About what?"

"Something that needs talkin' about. It's personal. Mike sent me."

A thrill ran through Jesse. This was it, then. He kept his voice neutral. "I'll be right down."

He turned off the monitor system, removed the memory disk, and carried it into the bedroom, where he passed it several times over a magnet. In a gym bag he packed his medical equipment: antiseptics, antibiotics, sutures, clamps, syringes, electromed scanner, as much equipment as would fit. Once, shoving it all in, he laughed. He dressed in a warm pea coat bought second-hand at the Army-Navy store and put the gun, also bought second-hand, in the coat pocket. Although of course the other man would be carrying. But Jesse liked the feel of it, a slightly heavy drag on his right side. He replaced the disk in the security system and locked the door. The computer was still pretending to consider its move for *go*, although of course it had near-instantaneous decision capacity.

"Where to?"

The slight man didn't answer. He strode purposefully away from the building, and Jesse realized he shouldn't have said anything. He followed the man down the street, carrying the gym bag in his left hand.

Fog had drifted in from the harbor. Boston smelled wet and grey, of rotting piers and dead fish and garbage. Even here, in the Morningside Security Enclave, where that part of the apartment maintenance fees left over from security went to keep the streets clean. Yellow lights gleamed through the gloom, stacked twelve stories high but crammed close together; even insurables couldn't afford to heat much space.

Where they were going there wouldn't be any heat at all.

Jesse followed the slight man down the subway steps. The guy paid for both of them, a piece of quixotic dignity that made Jesse smile. Under the lights he got a better look: The man was older than he'd thought, with webbed lines around the eyes and long, thin lips over very bad teeth. Probably hadn't ever had dental coverage in his life. What had been in his genescan? God, what a system.

"What do I call you?" he said as they waited on the platform. He kept his voice low, just in case.

"Kenny."

"All right, Kenny," Jesse said, and smiled. Kenny didn't smile back. Jesse told himself it was ridiculous to feel hurt; this wasn't a social visit. He stared at the tracks until the subway came.

At this hour the only other riders were three hard-looking men, two black and one white, and an even harder-looking Hispanic girl in a low-cut red dress. After a minute Jesse realized she was under the control of one of the black men sitting at the other end of the car. Jesse was careful not to look at her again. He couldn't help being curious, though. She looked healthy. All four of them looked healthy, as did Kenny, except for his teeth. Maybe none of them were uninsurable; maybe they just couldn't find a job. Or didn't want one. It wasn't his place to judge.

That was the whole point of doing this, wasn't it?

The other two times had gone as easy as Mike said they would. A deltoid suture on a young girl wounded in a knife fight, and burn treatment for a baby scalded by a pot of boiling water knocked off a stove. Both times the families had been so grateful, so respectful. They knew the risk Jesse was taking. After he'd treated the baby and left antibiotics and analgesics on the pathetic excuse for a kitchen counter, a board laid across the non-functional radiator, the young Hispanic mother had grabbed his hand and covered it with kisses. Embarrassed, he'd turned to smile at her husband, wanting to say something, wanting to make clear he wasn't just another sporadic do-gooder who happened to have a medical degree.

"I think the system stinks. The insurance companies should never have been allowed to deny health coverage on the basis of genescans for potential disease, and employers should never have been allowed to keep costs down by health-based hiring. If this were a civilized country, we'd have national health care by now!"

The Hispanic had stared back at him, blank-faced.

"Some of us are trying to do better," Jesse said.

It was the same thing Mike—Dr. Michael Cassidy—had said to Jesse and Anne at the end of a long drunken evening celebrating the halfway point in all their residencies. Although, in retrospect, it seemed to Jesse that Mike hadn't drunk very much. Nor had he actually said very much outright. It was all implication, probing masked as casual philosophy. But Anne had understood, and refused instantly. "God, Mike, you could be dismissed from the hospital! The regulations forbid residents from exposing the hospital to the threat of an uninsured malpractice suit. There's no money."

Mike had smiled and twirled his glasses between fingers as long as a pianist's. "Doctors are free to treat whomever they wish, at their own risk, even uninsurables. *Carter v. Sunderland.*"

"Not while a hospital is paying their malpractice insurance as residents, if the hospital exercises its right to so forbid. *Janisson v. Lechchevko.*"

Mike laughed easily. "Then forget it, both of you. It's just conversation."

Anne said, "But do you personally risk—"

"It's not right," Jesse cut in—couldn't she see that Mike wouldn't want to incriminate himself on a thing like this?—"that so much of the population can't get insurance. Every year they add more genescan pre-tendency barriers, and the poor slobs haven't even got the diseases yet!"

His voice had risen. Anne glanced nervously around the bar. Her profile was lovely, a serene curving line that reminded Jesse of those Korean screens in the expensive shops on Commonwealth Avenue. And she had lovely legs, lovely breasts, lovely everything. Maybe, he'd thought, now that they were neighbors in the Morningside Enclave. . . .

"Another round," Mike had answered.

Unlike the father of the burned baby, who never had answered Jesse at all. To cover his slight embarrassment—the mother had been so effusive—Jesse gazed around the cramped apartment. On the wall were photographs in cheap plastic frames of people with masses of black hair, all lying in bed. Jesse had read about this: It was a sort of mute, powerless protest. The subjects had all been photographed on their death beds. One of them was a beautiful girl, her eyes closed and her hand flung lightly over her head, as if asleep. The Hispanic followed Jesse's gaze and lowered his eyes.

"Nice," Jesse said. "Good photos. I didn't know you people were so good with a camera."

Still nothing.

Later, it occurred to Jesse that maybe the guy hadn't understood English.

The subway stopped with a long screech of equipment too old, too poorly maintained. There was no money. Boston, like the rest of the country, was broke. For a second Jesse thought the brakes weren't going to catch at all and his heart skipped, but Kenny showed no emotion and so Jesse tried not to, either. The car finally stopped. Kenny rose and Jesse followed him.

They were somewhere in Dorchester. Three men walked quickly toward them and Jesse's right hand crept toward his pocket. "This him?" one said to Kenny.

"Yeah," Kenny said. "Dr. Randall," and Jesse relaxed.

It made sense, really. Two men walking through this neighborhood probably wasn't a good idea. Five was better. Mike's organization must know what it was doing.

The men walked quickly. The neighborhood was better than Jesse had imagined: small row houses, every third or fourth one with a bit of frozen lawn in the front. A few even had flowerboxes. But the windows were barred, and over all hung the grey fog, the dank cold, the pervasive smell of garbage.

The house they entered had no flowerbox. The steel front door, triple-locked, opened directly into a living room furnished with a sagging sofa, a TV, and an ancient daybed whose foamcast headboard flaked like dandruff. On the daybed lay a child, her eyes bright with fever.

Sofa, TV, headboard vanished. Jesse felt his professional self take over, a sensation as clean and fresh as plunging into cool water. He knelt by the bed and smiled. The girl, who looked about nine or ten, didn't smile back. She had a long, sallow, sullen face, but the long brown hair on the pillow was beautiful: clean, lustrous, and well-tended.

"It's her belly," said one of the men who had met them at the subway. Jesse glanced up at the note in his voice, and realized that he must be the child's father. The man's hand trembled as he pulled the sheet from the girl's lower body. Her abdomen was swollen and tender.

"How long has she been this way?"

"Since yesterday," Kenny said, when the father didn't answer.

"Nausea? Vomiting?"

"Yeah. She can't keep nothing down.".

Jesse's hands palpated gently. The girl screamed.

Appendicitis. He just hoped to hell peritonitis hadn't set in. He didn't want to deal with peritonitis. Not here.

"Bring in all the lamps you have, with the brightest watt bulbs. Boil water—" He looked up. The room was very cold. "Does the stove work?"

The father nodded. He looked pale. Jesse smiled and said, "I don't think it's anything we can't cure, with a little luck here." The man didn't answer.

Jesse opened his bag, his mind racing. Laser knife, sterile clamps, scaramine—he could do it even without nursing assistance provided there was no peritonitis. But only if . . . the girl moaned and turned her face away. There were tears in her eyes. Jesse looked at the man with the same long, sallow face and brown hair. "You her father?"

The man nodded.

"I need to see her genescan."

The man clenched both fists at his side. Oh, God, if he didn't *have* the official printout . . . sometimes, Jesse had read, uninsurables burned them. One woman, furious at the paper that would forever keep her out of the middle class, had mailed hers, smeared with feces, and packaged with a plasticine explosive, to the president. There had been headlines, columns, petitions . . . and nothing had changed. A country fighting for its very economic survival didn't hesitate to expend front-line troops. If there was no genescan for this child, Jesse couldn't use scaramine, that miracle immune-system booster, to which about 15 percent of the population had a fatal reaction. Without scaramine, under these operating conditions, the chances of post-operative infection were considerably higher. If she couldn't take scaramine. . . .

The father handed Jesse the laminated print-out, with the deeply embossed seal in the upper corner. Jesse scanned it quickly. The necessary RB antioncogene on the eleventh chromosome was present. The girl was not potentially allergic to scaramine. Her name was Rosamund.

"Okay, Rose," Jesse said gently. "I'm going to help you. In just a little while you're going to feel so much better. . . ." He slipped the needle with anesthetic into her arm. She jumped and screamed, but within a minute she was out.

Jesse stripped away the bedclothes, despite the cold, and told the men how to boil them. He spread betadine over her distended abdomen and poised the laser knife to cut.

The hallmark of his parents' life had been caution. *Don't fall, now! Drive carefully! Don't talk to strangers!* Born during the Depression—the other one—they invested only in Treasury bonds and their own one-sixth acre of suburban real estate. When the marching in Selma and Washington had turned to killing in Detroit and Kent State, they shook their heads sagely: *See? We said so. No good comes of getting involved in things that don't concern you.* Jesse's father had held the same job for thirty years; his mother considered it immoral to buy anything not on sale. They waited until she was over forty to have Jesse, their only child.

At sixteen, Jesse had despised them; at twenty-four, pitied them; at twenty-eight, his present age, loved them with a despairing gratitude not completely free of contempt. They had missed so much, dared so little. They lived now in Florida, retired and happy and smug. "The pension"—they called it that, as if it were a famous diamond or a well-loved estate—was inflated by Collapse prices into providing a one-bedroom bungalow with beige carpets and a pool. In the pool's placid, artificially blue waters, the Randalls beheld chlorined visions of triumph. "Even after we retired," Jesse's mother told him proudly, "we didn't have to go backward."

"That's what comes from thrift, son," his father always added. "And hard work. No reason these deadbeats today couldn't do the same thing."

Jesse looked around their tiny yard at the plastic ducks lined up like headstones, the fanatically trimmed hedge, the blue-and-white striped awning, and his arms made curious beating motions, as if they were lashed to his side. "Nice, Mom. Nice."

"You know it," she said, and winked roguishly. Jesse had looked away before she could see his embarrassment. Boston had loomed large in his mind, compelling and vivid and hectic as an exotic disease.

There was no peritonitis. Jesse sliced free the spoiled bit of tissue that had been Rosamund's appendix. As he closed with quick, sure movements, he heard a click. A camera. He couldn't look away, but out of a sudden rush of euphoria he said to whoever was taking the picture, "Not one for the gallery this time. This one's going to *live*."

When the incision was closed, Jesse administered a massive dose of scaramine. Carefully he instructed Kenny and the girl's father about the medication, the little girl's diet, the procedures to maintain asepsis which, since they were bound to be inadequate, made the scaramine so necessary. "I'm on duty the next thirty-six hours at the hospital. I'll return Wednesday night, you'll either have to come get me or give me the address, I'll take a taxi and—"

The father drew in a quick, shaky breath like a sob. Jesse turned to him. "She's got a strong fighting chance, this procedure isn't—" A woman exploded from a back room, shrieking.

"No, no, noooooo. . . ." She tried to throw herself on the patient. Jesse lunged for her, but Kenny was quicker. He grabbed her around the waist, pinning her arms to her sides. She fought him, wailing and screaming, as he dragged her back through the door. "Murderer, baby killer, noooooooo—"

"My wife," the father finally said. "She doesn't . . . doesn't understand."

Probably doctors were devils to her, Jesse thought. Gods who denied people the healing they could have offered. Poor bastards. He felt a surge of quiet pride that he could teach them different.

The father went on looking at Rosamund, now sleeping peacefully. Jesse couldn't see the other man's eyes.

Back home at the apartment, he popped open a beer. He felt fine. Was it too late to call Anne?

It was—the computer clock said 2:00 A.M. She'd already be sacked out. In seven more hours his own thirty-six-hour rotation started, but he couldn't sleep.

He sat down at the computer. The machine hadn't moved to surround his empty square after all. It must have something else in mind. Smiling, sipping at his beer, Jesse sat down to match wits with the Korean computer in the ancient Japanese game in the waning Boston night.

Two days later, he went back to check on Rosamund. The rowhouse was deserted, boards nailed diagonally across the window. Jesse's heart began to pound. He was afraid to ask information of the neighbors; men in dark clothes kept going in and out of the house next door, their eyes cold. Jesse went back to the hospital and waited. He couldn't think what else to do.

Four rotations later the deputy sheriff waited for him outside the building, unable to pass the security monitors until Jesse came home.

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

SUFFOLK COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT

To Jesse Robert Randall of Morningside Security Enclave, Building 16, Apartment 3C, Boston, within our county of Suffolk. Whereas Steven & Rose Gocek of Boston within our County of Suffolk have begun an action of Tort against you returnable in the Superior Court holden at Boston within our County of Suffolk on October 18, 2004, in which action damages are claimed in the sum of $2,000,000 as follows:

TORT AND/OR CONTRACT FOR MALPRACTICE

as will more fully appear from the declaration to be filed in said Court when and if said action is entered therein:

WE COMMAND YOU, if you intend to make any defense of said action, that on said date or within such further time as the law allows you cause your written appearance to be entered and your written answer or other lawful pleadings to be filed in the office of the Clerk of the Court to which said writ is returnable, and that you defend against said action according to law.

Hereof fail not at your peril, as otherwise said judgment may be entered against you in said action without further notice.

Witness, Lawrence F. Monastersky, Esquire, at Boston, the fourth day of March in the year of our Lord two thousand four.

Alice P. McCarren
Clerk

Jesse looked up from the paper. The deputy sheriff, a soft-bodied man with small, light eyes, looked steadily back.

"But what . . . what happened?"

The deputy looked out over Jesse's left shoulder, a gesture meaning he wasn't officially saying what he was saying. "The kid died. The one they say you treated."

"Died? Of what? But I went back. . . ." He stopped, filled with sudden sickening uncertainty about how much he was admitting.

The deputy went on staring over his shoulder. "You want my advice, Doc? Get yourself a lawyer."

Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief, Jesse thought suddenly, inanely. The inanity somehow brought it all home. He was being sued. For malpractice. By an uninsurable. Now. Here. Him, Jesse Randall. Who had been only trying to help.

"Cold for this time of year," the deputy remarked. "They're dying of cold and malnutrition down there, in Roxbury and Dorchester and Southie. Even the goddamn weather can't give us a break."

Jesse couldn't answer. A wind off the harbor fluttered the paper in his hand.

"These are the facts," the lawyer said. He looked tired, a small man in a dusty office lined with second-hand law books. "The hospital purchased malpractice coverage for its staff, including residents. In doing so, it entered into a contract with certain obligations and exclusions for each side. If a specific incident falls under these exclusions, the contract is not in force with regard to that incident. One such exclusion is that residents will not be covered if they treat uninsured persons unless such treatment occurs within the hospital setting or the resident has reasonable grounds to assume that such a person is insured. Those are not the circumstances you described to me."

"No," Jesse said. He had the sensation that the law books were falling off the top shelves, slowly but inexorably, like small green and brown glaciers. Outside, he had the same sensation about the tops of buildings.

"Therefore, you are not covered by any malpractice insurance. Another set of facts: Over the last five years jury decisions in malpractice cases have averaged 85 percent in favor of plaintiffs. Insurance companies and legislatures are made up of insurables, Dr. Randall. However, juries are still drawn by lot from the general citizenry. Most of the educated general citizenry finds ways to get out of jury duty. They always did. Juries are likely to be 65 percent or more uninsurables. It's the last place the have-nots still wield much real power, and they use it."

"You're saying I'm dead," Jesse said numbly. "They'll find me guilty."

The little lawyer looked pained. "Not 'dead,' Doctor. Convicted—most probably. But conviction isn't death. Not even professional death. The hospital may or may not dismiss you—they have that right—but you can still finish your training elsewhere. And malpractice suits, however they go, are not of themselves grounds for denial of a medical license. You can still be a doctor."

"Treating who?" Jesse cried. He threw up his hands. The books fell slightly faster. "If I'm convicted I'll have to declare bankruptcy—there's no way I could pay a jury settlement like that! And even if I found another residency at some third-rate hospital in Podunk, no decent practitioner would ever accept me as a partner. I'd have to practice alone, without money to set up more than a hole-in-the-corner office among God-knows-*who* . . . and even that's assuming I can find a hospital that will let me finish. All because I wanted to help people who are getting shit on!"

The lawyer took off his glasses and rubbed the lenses thoughtfully with a tissue. "Maybe," he said, "they're shitting back."

"What?"

"You haven't asked about the specific charges, Doctor."

"Malpractice! The brat died!"

The lawyer said, "Of massive scaramine allergic reaction."

The anger leeched out of Jesse. He went very quiet.

"She was allergic to scaramine," the lawyer said. "You failed to ascertain that. A basic medical question."

"I—" The words wouldn't come out. He saw again the laminated gene-scan chart, the detailed analysis of chromosome 11. A camera clicking, recording that he was there. The hysterical woman, the mother, exploding from the back room: *noooooooooo*. . . . The father standing frozen, his eyes downcast.

It wasn't possible.

Nobody would kill their own child. Not to discredit one of the fortunate ones, the haves, the insurables, the employables. . . . No one would do that.

The lawyer was watching him carefully, glasses in hand.

Jesse said, "Dr. Michael Cassidy—" and stopped.

"Dr. Cassidy what?" the lawyer said.

But all Jesse could see, suddenly, was the row of plastic ducks in his parents' Florida yard, lined up as precisely as headstones, garish hideous yellow as they marched undeviatingly wherever it was they were going.

"No," Mike Cassidy said. "I didn't send him."

They stood in the hospital parking lot. Snow blew from the east. Cassidy wrapped both arms around himself and rocked back and forth. "He didn't come from us."

"He said he did!"

"I know. But he didn't. His group must have heard we were helping illegally, gotten your name from somebody—"

"But why?" Jesse shouted. "Why frame me? Why kill a child just to frame *me?* I'm nothing!"

Cassidy's face spasmed. Jesse saw that his horror at Jesse's position was real, his sympathy genuine, and both useless. There was nothing Cassidy could do.

"I don't know," Cassidy whispered. And then, "Are you going to name me at your malpractice trial?"

Jesse turned away without answering, into the wind.

Chief of Surgery Jonathan Eberhart called him into his office just before Jesse started his rotation. Before, not after. That was enough to tell him everything. He was getting very good at discovering the whole from a single clue.

"Sit down, Doctor," Eberhart said. His voice, normally austere, held unwilling compassion. Jesse heard it, and forced himself not to shudder.

"I'll stand."

"This is very difficult," Eberhart said, "but I think you already see our position. It's not one any of us would have chosen, but it's what we have. This hospital operates at a staggering deficit. Most patients cannot begin to cover the costs of modern technological health care. State and federal governments are both strapped with enormous debt. Without insurance companies and the private philanthropical support of a few rich families, we would not be able to open our doors to anyone at all. If we lose our insurance rating we—"

"I'm out on my ass," Jesse said. "Right?"

Eberhart looked out the window. It was snowing. Once Jesse, driving through Oceanview Security Enclave to pick up a date, had seen Eberhart building a snowman with two small children, probably his grandchildren. Even rolling lopsided globes of cold, Eberhart had had dignity.

"Yes, Doctor. I'm sorry. As I understand it, the facts of your case are not in legal dispute. Your residency here is terminated."

"Thank you," Jesse said, an odd formality suddenly replacing his crudeness. "For everything."

Eberhart neither answered nor turned around. His shoulders, framed in the grey window, slumped forward. He might, Jesse thought, have had a sudden advanced case of osteoporosis. For which, of course, he would be fully insured.

He packed the computer last, fitting each piece carefully into its original packing. Maybe that would raise the price that Second Thoughts was willing to give him: *Look, almost new, still in the original box.* At the last minute he decided to keep the playing pieces for *go,* shoving them into the suitcase with his clothes and medical equipment. Only this suitcase would go with him.

When the packing was done, he walked up two flights and rang Anne's bell. Her rotation ended a half hour ago. Maybe she wouldn't be asleep yet.

She answered the door in a loose blue robe, toothbrush in hand. "Jesse, hi, I'm afraid I'm really beat—"

He no longer believed in indirection. "Would you have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I can't," Anne said. She shifted her weight so one bare foot stood on top of the other, a gesture so childish it had to be embarrassment. Her toenails were shiny and smooth.

"After your next rotation?" Jesse said. He didn't smile.

"I don't know when I—"

"The one after that?"

Anne was silent. She looked down at her toothbrush. A thin pristine line of toothpaste snaked over the bristles.

"Okay," Jesse said, without expression. "I just wanted to be sure."

"Jesse—" Anne called after him, but he didn't turn around. He could already tell from her voice that she didn't really have anything more to say. If he had turned it would have been only for the sake of a last look at her toes, polished and shiny as *go* stones, and there really didn't seem to be any point in looking.

He moved into a cheap hotel on Boylston Street, into a room the size of a supply closet with triple locks on the door and bars on the window, where his money would go far. Every morning he took the subway to the Copley Square library, rented a computer cubicle, and wrote letters to hospitals across the country. He also answered classified ads in the *New England Journal of Medicine,* those that offered practice out-of-country where a license was not crucial, or low-paying medical research positions not too many people might want, or supervised assistantships. In the afternoons he walked the grubby streets of Dorchester, looking for Kenny. The lawyer representing Mr. and Mrs. Steven Gocek, parents of the dead Rosamund, would give him no addresses. Neither would his own lawyer, he of the collapsing books and desperate clientele, in whom Jesse had already lost all faith.

He never saw Kenny on the cold streets.

The last week of March, an unseasonable warm wind blew from the south, and kept up. Crocuses and daffodils pushed up between the sagging buildings. Children appeared, chasing each other across the garbage-laden streets, crying raucously. Rejections came from hospitals, employers. Jesse had still not told his parents what had happened. Twice in April he picked up a public phone, and twice he saw again the plastic ducks marching across the artificial lawn, and something inside him slammed shut so hard not even the phone number could escape.

One sunny day in May he walked in the Public Garden. The city still maintained it fairly well; foreign tourist traffic made it profitable. Jesse counted the number of well-dressed foreigners versus the number of ragged street Bostonians. The ratio equaled the survival rate for uninsured diabetics.

"Hey, mister, help me! Please!"

A terrified boy, ten or eleven, grabbed Jesse's hand and pointed. At the bottom of a grassy knoll an elderly man lay crumpled on the ground, his face twisted.

"My grandpa! He just grabbed his chest and fell down! Do something! Please!"

Jesse could smell the boy's fear, a stink like rich loam. He walked over to the old man. Breathing stopped, no pulse, color still pink. . . .

No.

This man was an uninsured. Like Kenny, like Steven Gocek. Like Rosamund.

"Grandpa!" the child wailed. "Grandpa!"

Jesse knelt. He started mouth-to-mouth. The old man smelled of sweat, of old flesh. No blood moved through the body. "Breathe, dammit, breathe," Jesse heard someone say, and then realized it was him. "*Breathe*, you old fart, you uninsured deadbeat, you stinking ingrate, breathe—"

The old man breathed.

He sent the boy for more adults. The child took off at a dead run, returning twenty minutes later with uncles, father, cousins, aunts, most of whom spoke some language Jesse couldn't identify. In that twenty minutes none of the well-dressed tourists in the Garden approached Jesse, standing guard beside the old man, who breathed carefully and moaned softly, stretched full-length on the grass. The tourists glanced at him and then away, their faces tightening.

The tribe of family carried the old man away on a homemade stretcher. Jesse put his hand on the arm of one of the young men. "Insurance? Hospital?"

The man spat onto the grass.

Jesse walked beside the stretcher, monitoring the old man until he was in his own bed. He told the child what to do for him, since no one else seemed to understand. Later that day he went back, carrying his medical bag, and gave them the last of his hospital supply of nitroglycerin. The oldest woman, who had been too busy issuing orders about the stretcher to pay Jesse any attention before, stopped dead and jabbered in her own tongue.

"You a doctor?" the child translated. The tip of his ear, Jesse noticed, was missing. Congenital? Accident? Ritual mutilation? The ear had healed clean.

"Yeah," Jesse said. "A doctor."

The old woman chattered some more and disappeared behind a door. Jesse gazed at the walls. There were no deathbed photos. As he was leaving, the woman returned with ten incredibly dirty dollar bills.

"Doctor," she said, her accent harsh, and when she smiled Jesse saw that all her top teeth and most of her bottom ones were missing, the gum swollen with what might have been early signs of scurvy.

"Doctor," she said again.

He moved out of the hotel just as the last of his money ran out. The old man's wife, Androula Malakassas, found him a room in somebody else's rambling, dilapidated boardinghouse. The house was noisy at all hours, but the room was clean and large. Androula's cousin brought home an old, multi-positional dentist chair, probably stolen, and Jesse used that for both examining and operating table. Medical substances—antibiotics, chemotherapy, IV drugs—which he had thought of as the hardest need to fill outside of controlled channels, turned out to be the easiest. On reflection, he realized this shouldn't have surprised him.

In July he delivered his first breech birth, a primapara whose labor was so long and painful and bloody he thought at one point he'd lose both mother and baby. He lost neither, although the new mother cursed him in Spanish and spit at him. She was too weak for the saliva to go far. Holding the warm-assed, nine-pound baby boy, Jesse had heard a camera click. He cursed too, but feebly; the sharp thrill of pleasure that pierced from throat to bowels was too strong.

In August he lost three patients in a row, all to conditions that would have needed elaborate, costly equipment and procedures: renal failure, aortic aneurysm, narcotic overdose. He went to all three funerals. At each one the family and friends cleared a little space for him, in which he stood surrounded by respect and resentment. When a knife fight broke out at the funeral of the aneurysm, the family hustled Jesse away from the danger, but not so far away that he couldn't treat the loser.

In September a Chinese family, recent immigrants, moved into Androula's sprawling boarding house. The woman wept all day. The man roamed Boston, looking for work. There was a grandfather who spoke a little English, having learned it in Peking during the brief period of American industrial expansion into the Pacific Rim before the Chinese government convulsed and the American economy collapsed. The grandfather played *go*. On evenings when no one wanted Jesse, he sat with Lin Shujen and moved the polished white and black stones over the grid, seeking to enclose empty spaces without losing any pieces. Mr. Lin took a long time to consider each move.

In October, a week before Jesse's trial, his mother died. Jesse's father sent him money to fly home for the funeral, the first money Jesse had accepted from his family since he'd finally told them he had left the hospital. After the funeral Jesse sat in the living room of his father's Florida house and listened to the elderly mourners recall their youths in the vanished prosperity of the '50s and '60s.

"Plenty of jobs then for people who're willing to work."

"Still plenty of jobs. Just nobody's willing any more."

"Want everything handed to them. If you ask me, this collapse'll prove to be a good thing in the long run. Weed out the weaklings and the lazy."

"It was the sixties we got off on the wrong track, with Lyndon Johnson and all the welfare programs—"

They didn't look at Jesse. He had no idea what his father had said to them about him.

Back in Boston, stinking under Indian summer heat, people thronged his room. Fractures, cancers, allergies, pregnancies, punctures, deficiencies, imbalances. They were resentful that he'd gone away for five days. He should be here; they needed him. He was the doctor.

The first day of his trial, Jesse saw Kenny standing on the courthouse steps. Kenny wore a cheap blue suit with loafers and white socks. Jesse stood very still, then walked over to the other man. Kenny tensed.

"I'm not going to hit you," Jesse said.

Kenny watched him, chin lowered, slight body balanced on the balls of his feet. A fighter's stance.

"I want to ask something," Jesse said. "It won't affect the trial. I just want to know. Why'd you do it? Why did *they*? I know the little girl's true genescan showed 98 percent risk of leukemia death within three years, but even so—how could you?"

Kenny scrutinized him carefully. Jesse saw that Kenny thought Jesse might be wired. Even before Kenny answered, Jesse knew what he'd hear. "I don't know what you're talking about, man."

"You couldn't get inside the system. Any of you. So you brought me out. If Mohammed won't go to the mountain—"

"You don't make no sense," Kenny said.

"Was it worth it? To you? To them? Was it?"

Kenny walked away, up the courthouse steps. At the top waited the Goceks, who were suing Jesse for two million dollars he didn't have and wasn't insured for, and that they knew damn well they wouldn't collect. On the wall of their house, wherever it was, probably hung Rosamund's deathbed picture, a little girl with a plain, sallow face and beautiful hair.

Jesse saw his lawyer trudge up the courthouse steps, carrying his briefcase. Another lawyer, with an equally shabby briefcase, climbed in parallel several feet away. Between the two men the courthouse steps made a white empty space.

Jesse climbed, too, hoping to hell this wouldn't take too long. He had an infected compound femoral fracture, a birth with potential erythroblastosis fetalis, and an elderly phlebitis, all waiting. He was especially concerned about the infected fracture, which needed careful monitoring because the man's genescan showed a tendency toward weak T-cell production. The guy was a day laborer, foul-mouthed and ignorant and brave, with a wife and two kids. He'd broken his leg working illegal construction. Jesse was determined to give him at least a fighting chance.●

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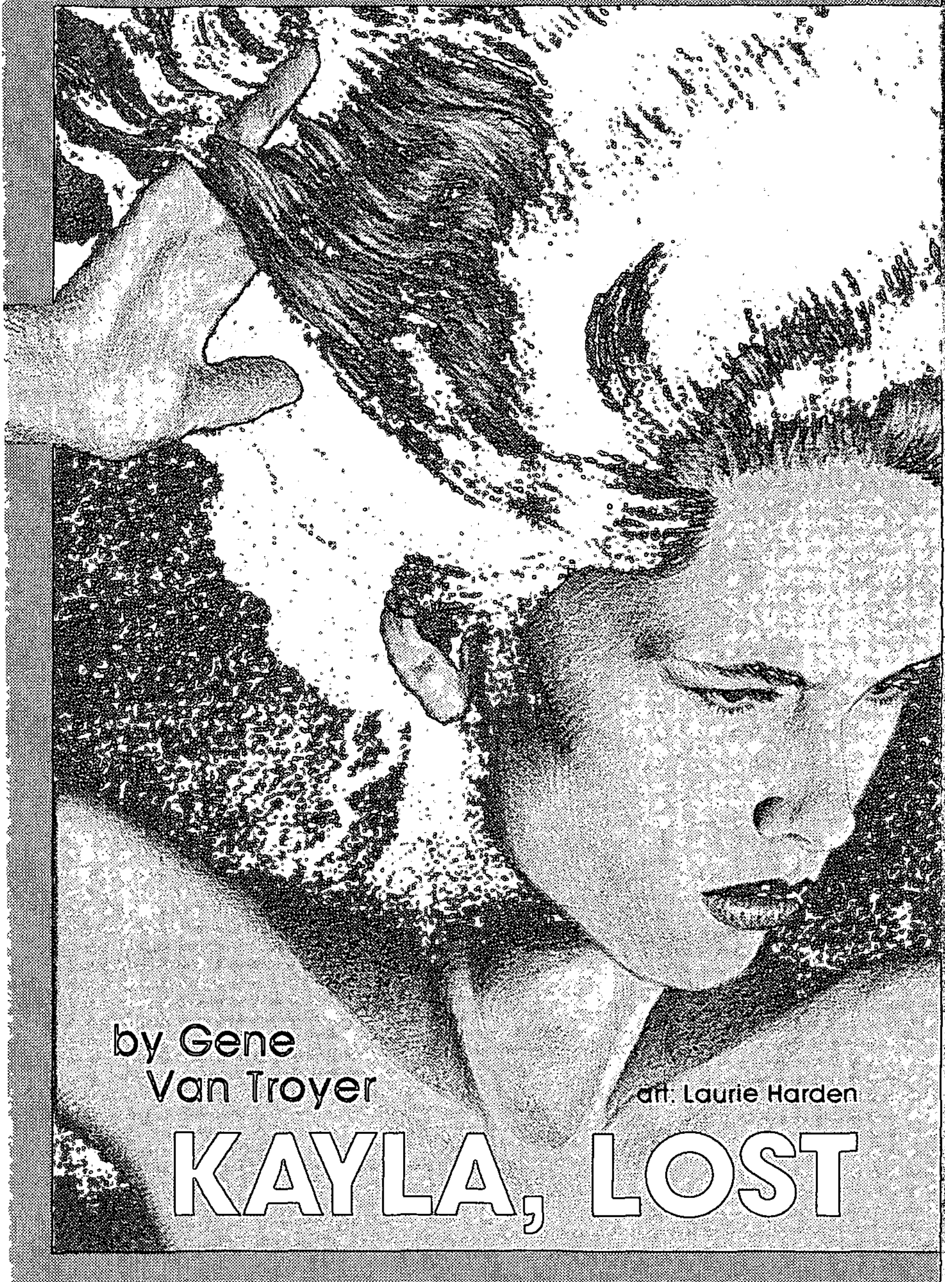


by Gene Van Troyer

art: Laurie Harden

KAYLA, LOST

A native of Oregon, the author currently lives in Japan. He has been writing and publishing stories, poems, translations, and articles in the SF genre both there and in the United States since 1973. He has also been the editor of the *Portland Review* and co-editor of *Star*Line*—the newsletter of the Science Fiction Poetry Association. "Kayla, Lost" is his first story for *IAsfm*.

Later, much later, after the Shanako colony had established itself, people were bound to ask: What was the Crossing like? And they are referred to the synesthesic symphonies composed by those solitary monitors who watched over the great ships as they fell through space. The symphony they remember most vividly is Melita Hallister's *Kayla Lost*. They remember it not only for its brilliance as music, but because *they have experienced* what Hallister and every other monitor saw and felt. It is staggering. Then but a very few pursue *Kayla Lost* to its origin. And the wonder of it grows. And the sorrow and joy.

1

Reaching across that emptiness like a touch—

It was like this: there were twenty monitors and each stood a six month watch in the synesthesic nexus of *Firefall*'s aicom net. Shifts were programmed with a one-month overlap at beginning and end for reasons of sanity, the pairings being either male-male, male-female, or female-female, depending on preference.

Melita came out of her dream cocoon ready to spend a month with Kitty Otani and would go back under after a month with Nicolas Bose.

But there was a small problem where she had least expected one.

Kayla. Melita wore Kayla on her soul, a gossamer fabric woven of failure. Kayla was dead.

But she lived on in Melita.

After disengaging from the nexus, she enjoyed her time with Kitty wherever and however often it suited them. As Kitty was particularly voracious, it was quite often, though not always on opposite sides of the thin interface of skin contact. There were long talks. Simple rough-and-tumble play. Joke sessions and music. And much more. Through it all, the basic theme was *Help me to be me!* It was the best way to slide into the routine of monitoring, and she knew it would be the same when she was with Nick: *I have been into the dark and cold where humans must die and fear to go. Touch me and make me human.*

When they made love, Melita was partial to the flotation exercise chamber. Kitty was not fond of the membranous strips of the levitation harness, but she never complained. She preferred the tall, silvery-plumed pampas grass in Ecologarium Three under the fabulous light of the starbow, or the clear cool water of the tiny lake while swimming in Ecologarium Twelve, where ludicrously tame koi would bump playfully against them.

This is when the problem always began: Melita would think of dead

Kayla, and their lovemaking would turn into sweaty work with no enjoyment.

It was frustrating for Kitty. A person likes to *be* with someone at times like that. Otherwise, why not go back to the girly-girls or the jolly-boys of the brainwire? If they weren't real, they were at least enthusiastic. But Kitty took it with a sigh and a natural wealth of good humor. She lay with her plump honey-colored body against Melita's olive lankiness.

"I guess a hug's the best I can do for you now," she said, then kissed Melita's earlobe. "But remember, I'm greedy."

"Sorry," Melita said into Kitty's neck. She fought the remoteness dividing them.

"You should be. That's the tenth time in two weeks. Miserly me for keeping count, but it's bad for my self-image. Forgive me?"

"Easily." Melita smiled wistfully at her, sat up and looked over the feathery pampas. "Don't know why. . . ."

Kitty watched her, half-lidding the black eyes in her delicate pear-shaped face, then stroked her friend's close-cropped golden brown hair. "Melita, this is as much for *you* as me. Are you going to take it with you out there?" She pointed straight up, to where the starbow shone through the vault of the transparent canopy. "C'mon, Monitor Hallister, my therapy's got another fourteen days!"

"You're right." Melita hugged her well-formed knees to her breasts and looked briefly into the uppenout, the circle of the starbow glimmering in her sea-blue eyes and the grassy fragrance of the pampas heady about her.

"Damn you, Kayla." She looked at Kitty, full lips compressing to a hard line, then parting. "It's not so bad right now. But after four months. . . . Maybe you can help me exorcise the ghost."

As she told Kitty the story, it was clear that Kayla was no mere ghost.

Kayla vibrant in her thoughts as Melita spoke: Kay stood near the glass doors leading onto the veranda of their leased condo, tense lines of her thin body and angular face sharp against a muzzy sky and indistinct Pacific Ocean horizon, her accusatory voice muted by the sounds of wind and far-off surf-rumble that came in through the open door: "I don't care, all I know is you're *leaving*, aba*n*doning me! If you really *loved* me. . . ."

Provoking her own plea, "You think I *like* what this is doing to you—?"

"—forever! You'll leave me with this horrible *suffer*ing—"

"Then *come* with us. You're a qualified deep-shuttle pilot, there's still time, they'll take you—"

And Kayla, her eyes squeezing shut against the mounting pressure pounding in her eyes, turning her face toward Melita.

"You don't care *you don't care!*"

Then opening her eyes: timeless ebony like endless space in their pronounced orbits, and Melita so close to them she could see her own face, and beyond, in her memory, the cyclonic force of Kayla's betrayed love—

A scene that was a motif for countless others repeated like images in opposing mirrors: great though her fear of losing Melita was, Kayla's fear of the unknown was greater—unspoken thoughts Melita knew because of the fusion.

Her suggestion, the mind-fusion:

The mingling of hearts and minds that would put each of them into the other, so that something more than just mementos would remain. Kayla resisted at first with petulant, wounded dignity, but then a coyness gathered about her eyes and the corners of her Mona Lisa-like smile that Melita had interpreted as acceptance. Now she *knew* what it was: a thirst for vengeance. As the transfer took place, the cramblesnap busy behind his illegally wired boards, Kayla snuffed herself with a brain-tangler that took even the jaded cramblesnap by surprise. His reflexive RAM dump from the synthesizer saved Melita from the psychic death-ebb that Kayla had hoped would destroy her lover's sanity and kill her will to live.

Melita recalled his cool pragmatism. *What a tableau!* he grinned while her terror-glazed eyes looked on. *You can't imagine what some geeks'll pay for this recording.* Then he was gone, leaving her groveling in sickness.

She shook as she spoke to Kitty.

"She *almost* succeeded," she said raggedly.

Wordlessly, Kitty rested a compassionate hand on Melita's shoulder.

"Know what the neuropsych told me after he scraped Kayla out of my brain? 'You're tough,' he said. 'Most people would've been splah after a psychodrama like that.' "

Melita laughed wanly.

"Too tough to be *just* a colonist, and so I found myself assigned to *this* job." Laughter again, forced. "I'm not sure how good a scraping he did, but he said he'd peeled her back to a *mere* memory. Huh! Pretty independent memory! She's babbling back there now. . . ."

"You should've had a memory wipe," Kitty said vehemently. "Maybe you should get one *now*! What happened wasn't your fault."

Melita shook her head, brows lifting as she widened her eyes.

"Maybe it's just guilt, but I have to deal with it." She breathed deeply. "Thanks. I feel a lot better. Like the man said, I'm tough, so let's worry about you."

"It must really rankle, knowing she's resurrected, still walking around, purged of *your* memory," Kitty said.

"No, she isn't." Melita shook her head. "Didn't I make myself clear?

She planned a murder-suicide, but only the *suicide* succeeded. They didn't bring her back."

Kitty said nothing. The law was inflexible: the punishment for even attempted murder was denial of resurrection. Not only had all of Kayla's genes been destroyed, but her diary had been vaporized. Nothing of her remained, except that part of her which had been put into Melita's mind.

To avoid Kayla's "ghost" interfering again, Melita began taking light aphrodesial doses of pheromones. That improved things. Kayla was, after all, more than four years in her subjective past. At hand was the task of getting Kitty back from the uppenout and into the joy and anguish of her humanity.

Kitty left her some remarkable memories, company for the long vigil to come. With well-hidden regret, Melita saw Kitty to her dream cocoon, an ovoid pod of clear crystal that sparkled like bluish ice as it energized and cradled its occupant into her near-frozen, dream-filled hibernation.

So long, Kitty.

Welcome back, Kayla.

2

In the nexus: two months, and it grew lonelier and large.

Here Melita did not merely watch the varied operations of *Firefall*; mind and body she *became* them, and the awfulness of what lay beyond heaved against and peeled away with an icy sucking from the tough carapace of her skin. Her soul stretched thin through the vast silence. Reading the dark: as crushing in its boundless tenuity as it was beautiful in its austere, spectral perfection. Melita saw herself as a net of light sweeping between the stars, heard herself as a thin rush of wind.

The monitors fell through the mortal negation of space in their tiny community of five ships, each keeping watch over twenty thousand colonists locked away from time in hibernation chambers. She visualized herself as a great eagle in her eyrie, warming her charges beneath the life-giving heat of her belly feathers.

Though she faced the interstellar vacuity in solitude, still she was not completely alone; riding an eighth of a light-year to the stern was the *Eiseley*, and at one quarter light year, the limit of her sensory range, was the *Heinlein*. She could feel the presence of those other monitors, a warm touch of affirmation bridging the cold and dark.

The only other metaphor that fit was that of the falling man—frightening! For the falling was a primal sort of fall, the *Fall* into endless loss that always turned the human world into a tapestry of dross and illusion. How much she preferred the image of the eagle!

In the nexus: eidetic and dream surreal, everywhere at once: a thought-leaf tumbling through the bifurcating corridors of the ship; watching herself through her holocam eyes as she reclined in the straps of the nexus hammock: sound there a sprinkling of spangled colors, sight the thrill of emotion racing in the blood, touch a symphony of bells: she was a net of light, of memories layered like butter through her thoughts:

Her touch in the night, cool fingers caressing, two-hearted but one in their embrace—

Not Kitty.

Kayla.

Succubuslike she came to Melita with gathering constancy as the weeks drew by. Announced by a cannon of discordant voices that shattered in a ghostly climax, her face would suddenly crystallize.

Melita discovered that she could chase her away by composing music, and thus created the first fugato of her synesthesic symphony, a strange piece opening with a breathy sound that builds to the full-bodied moan of a bamboo flute, a long note bending. But soon it became obvious to Melita that she composed not to *keep* Kayla away, *but for the dead woman's sake.* Each appearance Kayla made presented a new look at sensory fugues, which Melita dutifully set to the music of mind and body on the synesthesic organ. This in turn would prompt another visitation.

Why are you here?

Because you call.

The kernel of Kayla's personality still lodged in Melita's own answered only through the nexus, a suggestion of malevolence that Melita sought to appease.

"No," said aicom, *Firefall*'s autonomously intelligent computer, whom Melita just called "Ike." Its voice addressed her over the skimewire like the muttering flames of a night-time desert camp fire. "If anyone is calling, it's you calling yourself. The scraping was thorough. Perhaps I should erase Kayla's eidolon?"

"No!" Melita ordered. "I have to deal with it."

"I understand," it answered reluctantly.

Kayla hung in her soul like a window, the hard lines of her narrow face frozen in a pane leaning outward on a twisted hinge. She mocked Melita.

Melita feverishly composed. The task was eased by the ship's vast data banks, aiding her creative furor with the mechanics of composing. It offered no help for the pain at creativity's root.

In came the tympana: her body thundered with outrage. Kayla returned for more.

Stars exploded, their gases thinning into the ringing of wind chimes. Kayla came back for more.

Her heart split on the glassine peal of a piccolo. Still Kayla returned.

Then Melita's work froze. It was while she fumbled in this cumbrous syncopation that she first sensed *something* in the uppenout, far beyond the ship, *calling* to her.

It's so cold. . . .

When her probes brushed it, she thought her mind played tricks on her. Ike analyzed all near space around the ship.

"Nothing," it reported, "but the expected."

Hydrogen, traces of dust, the eternal blizzard of high energy particles. Two of the other four ships following them.

Of course, she chided herself, said, "A reflection from *Eiseley's* monitor." Ike did not register it. "There's something *out* there, Ike!"

"You *are* registering *some*thing. Scanners say you're the source."

"So I'm imagining things!"

"Could it be that you're projecting another manifestation of Kayla?"

"Soooo. . . ." She nodded. Shadows licked through her thoughts as she again probed outward.

. . . . co-o-l-d. . . .

And whatever *it* was leapt at the warmth of her presence. It was *not* Kayla.

Melita's visual universe was of light refracted through the prism of relativistic velocity. The starbow dominated the view, a vast bowl rimmed with brilliant color bands and filled with stars and a thin violet light into which *Firefall* endlessly plummeted. Stars crept slowly through the color bands, squashed into thin lenses.

She shifted to a "corrected" view. Her body lurched as she confronted the bitter vacuum.

Hundreds of kilometers ahead great sheets of plasmic auroral light splashed, rippled away from the ram field, a wake cloven in the attenuated dusts and atomic matter of space by the field's magnetic vortex, which collected and accelerated hydrogen into the huge fusion engines that propelled *Firefall*. More than this, the field vortex shielded the ship from the death touch of the cosmic ray flux, and turned away dust that would otherwise consume the ship in a rain of micro-thermonuclear explosions.

Ahead and a few degrees to one side was 82 Eridani, sliding fractionally closer as its galactic orbit and *Firefall's* converged toward intersection light years down the line. During Nick Bose's watch the ship would turn its tail to where the star would eventually be and begin the long deceleration, the bloody light of its fusion torch fanning across the night like an angry comet.

Nothing but the expected, Melita thought. Several light weeks away from the ship and nearly on a direct course was a thick, coronalike cloud of dust that they would graze past in a shipmonth.

What's out there calling—!

Kayla's face flashed before her. Aching emptiness yawned in Melita.

As the shipdays passed and she groped for the symphonic climax that would reconcile her to Kayla's memory, the coldness bided and grew. So intense was it, she felt it even after leaving the nexus for the brightly lit warmth of confining walls. In the ecologaria, it was like an awareness of an infinite mass of glacial ice grinding over her. Kayla had spoken of such iciness filling her before they had met, but this—*this* never came from within Melita.

cold. . . . so long. . . . so cold. . . . That was the primary message, layered with a second like a rime of frost: *Alone.* And in the uppenout.

Almost as if I were a mirror, she thought. Am I hallucinating?

Ike insisted she was not, only that Kayla's memories were speaking. Again it suggested a memory wipe. Melita declined.

Then the dreams came: Always an actinic, stark landscape, and in the night sky, stars were few and dim. The sun was swollen and ruddy, bleary and too close to the earth. Half the boreal sky blazed with convulsed sheets of light in an aurora gone wild. At dawn of the long day, great aureoles of light emerged from the earth, dancing gaily in airlessness filled with the pulse of energy. Groups of seven gathered in tight clusters; when they parted, there was a new sphere of brighter light.

The dream always ended in a journey to the north magnetic pole. There, a mighty vortex alive with charged particles and prismatic light twisted up into space. Dimmer spheres of light joined together in sevens, plunged into the vortex. She felt joy: a goodly journey began there.

A cryptic message sifted into her mind:

There! Again the shadowing lit light's Edge! Another, my all!

This isn't Kay! What are my memories doing to me?

Melita regarded the dreams as a kind of ritual, and the accompanying emotions—so alien, so akin—even suggested a title, *The Love Deaths at Light's End.* But the sentiments weren't exactly love, the deaths not death.

And still that feeling of coldness, reaching through the void—

She was in Ecologarium Twelve when it happened. She had gone up with a portable sorg to dwell on music, polishing what she had done and puzzling over what she needed to add. The skimecap's tomographic field permeated her brain with its nuclear magnetic resonance, evoking synesthesic awareness and vividly enhancing her memory. Though she sat relaxed in lotus position in a grove of Japanese bonsai pine beside the pond, in her memory she walked the streets of San Francisco with

Kayla in the Free Zone, strolling past the garish marquees of the dream emporia and cut-rate fusion parlors.

Kayla's platinum hair was longer, ruffling in a breeze, and she was urging Melita to share a concocted dream in an emporium, or a celebrity's franchised experience. Melita preferred to be the source of her own experiences, but they were newly in love, having met only weeks earlier on a deep haul from the Belt, and the headiness of that first passion had not ebbed. She wanted to please her lover.

How affecting Kayla's declarations of love seemed now. Melita toyed with a few phrases of formulaic, richly sentimental organ notes in vox humana, an emotional surge of pale neon pink and lavender and a cloying whiff of cheap perfume; then threw it all out, unable to accept the shallowness. Was it Kay's truth, or Leeta's soured memories?

Melita would be just as shallow to present it as truth. In her mind Kayla looked at her coldly and said, *Now you're growing eyes*. Melita trembled.

Had the skimecap's field made her more receptive? When she looked up, the bleak landscape from her dreams faded into view, superimposed over the garden around her and populated with its energy beings. Six danced toward her, tried to press around her. Her skin tingled with scents of cinnamon and clove, orange peel and jasmine. She was dizzy.

"*My* here not *here*," Kayla spoke suddenly, pointed at the dancing spheres of light. "Not cold. *Here* so *cold*. . . ."

Melita's convulsive slap killed the synesthesic organ. Her heart beat *plup-plup!* against her inner ear, thick pools of sweat twisted down the sides of her face. She hugged her legs like anchors, attention fixed on the park, the tiered hanging gardens around her, as she lavished silent gratitude on the insensate trees, shrubs, flowers, lawn, robot tenders for their mere, orderly existence.

Kayla had *nothing* to do with it! Awed, her breath caught.

She shivered at the thought of the unknown. And stood up. And hurridly left the ecologarium. In the nexus, she probed outward.

Who are you?

Her brain burned with the response. A fierce roar tore her throat, left as a scream of primal terror.

A voice was shouting hoarsely, "I'm here! *I'm here*!" Joy and heartache in it.

Her scalp was the corona of a star. She huddled in the corner she had fled to after tearing away from the sensory network. The walls of the small nexus chamber were a mirage streaked with black abyssal rifts. Her throat was raw.

"Melita!" Ike demanded. She numbly saw that rows of amber warning lights had blazed to life on the consoles.

I'm still me, was her amazed thought. It was as if everything had been scooped out of her, then poured back in.

"Melita! Explain this situation!" Ike was *shouting*, she realized. She regarded the banks of bionic and optical gear around her.

"A powerful contact from an alien." Then, emphatically, "And *I am not the source*."

"I'm sorry, Melita. Psychiatric assessment shows an unacceptably high emotional stress threshold. If you do not wipe Kayla's memory, I must invoke Command Prerogative and call Monitor Bose to assume your post."

"Ike," she said calmly, defiance thickening her voice, "I'll gladly reduce my stress, but I *will not* submit to induced amnesia, however slight, and I protest your outrageous misreading of my life!"

She went to the nexus hammock, donned the skimecap. The fiber-optic skimewire that joined her to Ike glowed a soft blue laser light.

"I'm not going psychotic on you." She was the ship. Her words were high piano notes ringing in a dissonant glissando, a passage she would work into her symphony. "Go ahead. Analyze. If you think it's just me, then I'm further around the bend than you think, and I'd better dismiss *myself*."

She blinked, eyelids cymbals clashing. Her blood flowed in streams from high mountains, and her hands reached along the ram field, scooping hydrogen into her ravenous shipmouth.

Her mind was open to Ike's decision, and the aicom considered it. But she had not jeopardized *Firefall*, only remembered an old wound.

Cold, came the call—from beyond, or within her? Yet, her actions were not psychotic. She was even more confused than Ike.

"Very well." Ike's words were shafts of lightning leaping her synapses. Melita removed the skimecap. The nexus slowly congealed around her. She felt vindicated.

"You're sure I haven't contaminated your program?" she needled.

"Impossible," it replied stiffly. "As far as I'm concerned, it's wait and see. I can't pick it up, but I'm not human, and that's why you're here."

"It's out there, and I'm going to try communicating with it."

She approached the Presence, as Ike dubbed it, with greater discretion the next day, still shaking from dreams that confused it with Kayla.

How to communicate with an unknown? The seeds of its symbology were already in her mind from the dream ritual. As she began analyzing that, she was pleasantly surprised by one response that came as a piquant fluting of woodwinds that advanced her symphony by a handful of passages.

Cautiously Melita opened herself to the Presence. The absolute *cold* was less: now there was gladness like a voice in an aria, a high steady note.

But where was the source?

"A wide-open question," Ike said skeptically.

And the answer, when it came, too late.

Over the next three shipdays, she achieved enough comprehension to begin an intelligible dialogue with the Presence. Coldness melted into joy. What Melita had not considered was that the Presence might be doing exactly as she—analyzing *Melita's* experience.

So it was that on the third day she was shocked speechless when Kayla appeared against the colors of the starbow, fresh as the day Melita had first met her.

She smiled tenderly at Melita and said, "Touching, Leeta, so beautiful in warming. I love you. Is right not?" Slowly Kayla began to weep.

3

Call her Kayla-O. Ike refused to, preferring the non-anthropomorphic *Presence*, but to Melita she was Kayla-the-Other.

She was and wasn't Kayla. She used the ghost of Kayla's personality as a window into Melita's heart. Melita had no choice but to accept it.

"Merging-completedlyness-not-was," Kayla-O said, smiling tentatively. "Taked it all. Me for you for me accepting you do? *My all!*"

Dizzy as the convoluted grammar was, Melita could not deny Kayla-O's pain. She almost wept herself.

"Oh, yes! Yes!"

"*Ahhhh* . . . it good so is. *So long. . . .*"

Kayla, oh Kayla. . . !

Kayla burned in her mind, a cherry coal in a gray bed of ash.

Melita's ache of atonement: A bass viol moaning in a minor key, all sharps and flats. How she wanted to be near her. . . .

But Melita must remember that that was all illusion. She thought of Kayla-O as "she" only because "it" had donned Kayla's *mask*. Kayla-O's gender was incomprehensible to humans.

"Comingly to be I with you am," she said.

"Have you become Kayla?"

"But no-yes. Couldly you I take not—"

"I don't understand!"

"Ohhh, *me!* You I not couldly take? I could notly youly—"

"You could not take me?"

"Ah! So *there*! Yes. Communicately—no? *-shun?*—communication notly would. Oh. So see I. Would not. So I taken this in you? Opened on you window, use it to you come, you to me. So *longly* for the other waiting, so waitingly long. . . ."

Oh, God, Kayla. The bass viol lowed. Melancholy light shredded through her like leaf shadows.

"Who and *where* are you? Where are you from?" she asked hesitantly.

"Out here!"

She cringed with the agony, the taste of steel spikes stabbing her tongue.

Her natural name was a complex shifting of wave-rhythms Melita could never know. Every being had a unique name. Names etched in music and wave dances, borne through a million life cycles.

The dream vista of the ritual spread before Melita. *Dawn comes,* a wind-hush and pounding like peripatetic rain. Now there was a voice to it as the People emerged from the radioactive rock to sing and dance hosannahs:

—Thus it is as the Great August Spirit Who Returned in Earthly Form decreed: Rejoice God's wakening! He brings living light to nourish our days!

The tumid mass of the Sun climbs over the horizon and they joy in the pianissimo of Holy Light:

—God is come! Praise be to the living day!

As a great purple wave, the People swarm over the molten rivers and radiation-blasted plains of their world, then break into clusters like iridescent clouds of soap bubbles, hopping, dancing, whirling jubilantly about each other:

—God the Sun resolves the Shadow's edge!

Gathering in their Sevens, they glow fiercely ultra-violet, then red, yellow, orange, blue, white, then burst apart to release the newborn:

—We are the young: we breathe God's light to drive the dark away!

Now the procession to the Vortex begins, where the Love Deaths occur after the Merging:

—For the Great August Spirit has said: from the Vortex we were born and to it will we consign our Merged forces and rise to the Plane of the Gods.

And a Seven Merge their forces, plunge into the rending Vortex. Then another Seven. And another.

And the long journey is begun, a mixing of forces worked in the Vortex that makes the Seven truly One as the Changed are expelled into space, where they rove outward from God to all the other Suns of this universe, sailing an energy sea burgeoning with life. There is no void here, but an endless Awareness. Never are the Changed alone, and when one meets another with harmonizing wave-rhythms, a Merging occurs; and so it goes over the galactic days, until a Changed has grown larger than a Sun.

The final stage of existence begins: the Changed seeks a Host Sun for the Last Merging.

But after ages of communion with the God stars, *this* Changed approached a star that suddenly collapsed. The shell of star fire that blasted out flung her away, but a worm hole opened, snared her in its gravitational maw, and sucked a part of her into Melita's universe, where she must seize tenuous physical form. Here the Suns did not sing, the Gods were *gone*, the sea an infinite waste. How many aeons had she wandered alone, anchored in this terrible place, cursed to hear the songs of home and shunned by those on the other side who could not Merge with her without being likewise trapped?

"To find I'm not alone, Leeta," said Kayla-O, "to find your warmth . . . you see? Oh, come to a place my memories see!"

And before she could reply they were there: more than a dream, less than real.

The streets were eerily populated as they walked arms linked down Telegraph Hill and came into the Free Zone. Although crowds filled the sidewalks, they were utterly silent and as indistinct as specters. The glitzy profusion of candy-colored laser signs and marquees ran together in a single rippling, strobing ribbon of light that fringed every building. Briefly they paused at a street-front altershop, watched an old Chinese woman implant the umbilical of a sparrow-sized winged dragon on the shoulder of a drunken jolly-boy; then, before them an archway that opened on a staircase spiraling downward: the passage into the dream emporium was a mosaic of inlaid mother-of-pearl, mirrors, and colored glass all scrambled into Rorschach patterns.

"But don't you find it all unsatisfactory?" Melita wondered. "I mean, when you come back from it, you see it was an illusion."

"Ask a dream-freak," Kayla said. "He'll call *you* an illusion."

The set of her eyes was hard, gaze remote.

"But I'm not," Melita said.

"No." Kayla gestured at the vacant bodies they vaguely saw through the tinted panels of the reality simulators. "Not like these. You're an anchor."

Afterward, Melita felt greyed-out, a nasty hangover of emptiness that sharply contrasted with Kayla's vivacity. She could not even recall the purchased experience the next day, only that it had been pale and pretentious beside the bright content of her own life, a little like having sex with someone she did not care about. Did Kayla believe that her own life was so colorless?

"No!" she cried, recalling that none of this was real.

Kayla smiled uncertainly. "I was so happy then, to find the shelter of your warmth, and then the fusion—"

"No, it won't work this way!" Melita was shouting now. "You died because of it, of me! Don't drag me through it again, I couldn't take it!"

She surveyed the hazy street, gleeful voices, puissant rhythms of middle-eastern music pulsating around them. How subtly they had seduced themselves into the totality of this memory. She shivered in the night breeze coming off the Bay, closed her eyes and fought the memory's drag.

"But . . . *Lee*ta." Gone the easy self-assurance. "Died? But you weren't responsible . . . It was in—*me?*—all along. *Dead?* But I'm still here. . . !"

"You're not Kayla."

"It was fusion." Kayla-O's voice was thin with distance. "Not complete Merging, *wrong!* Ghastly disharmony!"

Melita! called Ike's commanding voice. In the buildings across the street she could make out the tenuous lines of instrument panels shimmering as if through heat-waves. The setting stretched like hot glass, shattered into a cloud of scintillating beads.

"*Leeta,*" Kayla-O cried from the receding island of memory. "*Don't break Touching! I come to you, Leeta. This time Merging will be complete. . .*"

The plea flash-fired through her. Nerves felt momentarily cauterized. Oleographs of glistered colors swirled in her vision, evoking strings and woodwinds looping up and down the chromatic scale in plaintive phrases. They shrank to a small knot in her throat that tasted of freshly fallen snow.

"How can she think she could Merge with me?" she asked.

"Look at this," Ike said. In the air before her an oblate sphere of fierce violet light blazed like a young blue giant star. A cacophony of woodwinds pulsating. "This is how the Presence sees our gravitonic signature."

How closely she resembled a Changed! How confused Kayla-O was.

The woodwinds purled and fluttered.

"It has not sensed you as an entity apart from the ship."

Déjà vu seized her: she saw herself through Kayla's eyes, different and alien and *wrong because you weren't enough like me!* was what Kayla had said in that final moment before the brain-tangler had taken her.

Melita was convinced she could not grasp the fundamental difference between their experience. She flailed against her limited mind. Kayla-O's understanding of Melita must be just as flawed: the imagery she had dredged out of Melita had to be truth's poor approximation. Melita felt powerless.

Energy beings Merging, becoming each other in one.

Kayla moving in her mind, a restless searchlight casting shadows.

"It's all you have to work with," Ike said. "Not enough data for anything else."

Drained, she left the nexus. In her apartment she keyed for a light meal of stir-fried vegetables, steamed rice and sauteed pork in sweet-and-sour sauce. Afterward she sat at her desk, sorg before her, and fitted on the skimecap. She gazed for a moment at a triptych of Hokasai's "Poetry Picture Mirrors" on the wall before her: rocky, sparsely treed promontories floating over their reflections in ethereal lakes like abysses of polished light, the gnarled pines and rudely dressed peasants on the banks somehow incidental, and yet the balancing reminders that no matter how deep an illusion might be, people still existed in the world. Her hands squeezed each other tightly, mind becoming an ocean of free-associating thoughts.

The nets of her synesthesia dredged through the splintering wavetips of her experience: *she was a fast sailor falling through the vast largo of the stars:* speed was the rapid beating of tabla, the burn of the stars the long harmonic drone of tamboura, and Kayla a wheeling adagio of smokey vermillion scrim over the abyss, bridging the channel of time, speaking—

her words ricochets echoing—

I'm coming—

the molto cascade of notes from guitar and oud raining like waterfalls—

her memories the collision-spray of an impact, dissolving into the mingled musk and spearmint of bass and soprano strings—

Numbness was a heavy layer embracing her skull. The music was a shield against fear. Kayla was closer to resolution.

At last she removed the skimecap. Synesthesia shattered into needles piercing her. She climbed into her bunk, a cell-like speck of life implanted at the mid-point of a 10 kilometer starship pushing 99 percent of light speed, and space a roofless cathedral ascending in her brain. Inevitability was a narcotic tide stirring in her.

Sleep was fitful, illuminated by Kayla-dreams like remote flashes of sheet lightning. Shortly before she awakened, she discovered she was weightless in a slow spin, Kayla's body trying to move against hers and the vastness of the cosmos leaking into her through every pore.

Nothing to fear. Kayla's voice adhering to her thoughts. *Open yourself. Fill us with the perfect music of your soul, and free us. You are so close, so radiant, had I arms but long enough embrace you I could.*

She awoke in a shivering sweat. She was in the ship, but a low moan of shakuhachi wrapped in bass strings anchored her to the uppenout. Two places at once!

There is nothing to fear?

4

Where was Kayla-O?

Time was the obstacle: *Firefall* moved at 99 percent of light speed, and the relativistic crucible of time-dilation fused them into a ghost world of the past. Anything they detected with the forward sensors was far closer than its reflected image showed. They were in a temporal blind-spot.

"I've found it, and it's the only answer," Ike said.

Melita was in the aft launching bay overseeing the deployment of an interstellar communications platform, a heavily shielded cylinder a hundred meters long with an array of fusion braking-rockets clustered at one end. She watched from the control booth as the huge shock cradle slid it through the bay doors amid a steady hollow rumble sounding in the ship's superstructure; then on the monitors as the cradle released it and maneuvering jets nudged it a safe distance away before the fusion motors kicked in, and fifty gees of thrust catapulted it unrecoverably into the eternal night. It could all have been automatic, but since she was here for the show she had control of the cradle and the doors.

"Show me," she told Ike.

The air behind her shimmered. She turned and saw the dust cloud they had detected a few shipdays ago floating near one corner of the ceiling. It now resembled a huge convex disk and the surface flowed in a pattern that reminded her of cytoplasm.

"I missed it at first," Ike explained, "but it wasn't behaving like a normal dust cloud—no accretions of denser matter resulting from microgravitational attraction; and then I noticed it was all evenly distributed, as if it were a single colloidal mass."

Ike showed a series of isomorphic, spectroscopic and infrared images as illustration, then another isomorphic image replaced it all, a representation of the dust cloud's structure. Melita gasped in wonder.

"It's beautiful!" It was a sphere, but looked more like the interlocked petals of countless chrysanthemums in a constant state of blossoming. Any area or cross-section exactly duplicated the whole. *A hypersphere*, said Ike. The other side of the cloud was a concave pan that acted as a photon sail.

"But it's light days away!" she interrupted. "How could I possibly carry on a real-time conversation with it?"

"Yes, it *is* extraordinary," said Ike. "But the fact is, you are."

"Using hyperwaves?" she said half as a joke.

"For all I know—yes. We have one improbability, so another's as likely as not. A pity, because it would have been illuminating to study this phenomenon further."

"What are you talking about?"

And Ike showed her: the next projection was of *Firefall* slowly closing on the "cloud." The positions were only approximate, but the joy she had felt turned bitter.

A collision course.

"The Presence is maneuvering to meet us," Ike explained. "Given its tenuous nature, we'll suffer no damage. *It* will be destroyed."

She needed no description: the image erupted like an embolism in her mind: Kayla-O's body seized by the ram field and stretched like wind-shredded smoke, whipped into incandescent froth, vanishing in a blaze of heat and x-rays as each mote of her body was rent by hyperacceleration.

"Nice you can be so objective," Melita stammered, shocked, a fist of anguish clenching in her stomach. "I have to warn her off!"

Even as she spoke, she knew it was hopeless. She tried not to think about it as the pod whisked her four kilometers up the tracks to the nexus.

"It's my job to be objective," Ike said gently, its voice emanating from the air around her. "I don't like this either, but what would you have me do? Endanger the ship with a course change?"

"Do you have to be so *rational*?" Ike did not bother answering.

Kayla-O was there like the dazzling photosphere of a star. Ike had to shield her from that brilliance. Still that muted voice of insistent desire buffeted her awareness like wind against a pane of glass loose in its frame.

At last you have returned. I thought my soul would freeze, my heart spurned once again. Let us Merge, join voices in loving song!

—No, you must not approach. Turn away! Or you will be killed!

Fear shellacked her mouth, the sweat-prickle on her skin evoking brass wind carillons ringing in a storm.

There will be no death, but Joining, came the reply. *We will be renewed. We will be freed.* An undertow of urgency drove Kayla-O's voice. *You must understand as I am sure!*

—It is you who do not understand. . .

I am coming near for I must and heal the you-I wound, aloneness is not the Way. . .

And so it went, a futile circling. She was diminished by her failure, responsible for the coming disaster—the same way she had felt about Kayla, once she had recovered from the mess left by the cramblesnap. When she left the nexus, her body was thick with despair's enervation, her head a throbbing ache of warring thoughts.

If I couldn't get through to a *human being*, she despaired, what chance have I with a being who doesn't even *think* humanly?

She tried not to consider it. Changing course at this late stage was pointless. At near-light speed, *Firefall* had the mass and gravitational field of a small planet. Even rotating the ship for deceleration would take months of precisely timed burns from its maneuvering rockets, and at this velocity the gravitational field was a shock wave that in itself would annihilate Kayla-O if the ram field somehow did not.

Sleep was restless, a semi-conscious fever of pitching about, the half-light of her mind a delirium of sad auroral spheres scorching through her brain.

What disease kills Merging, they lamented. *Here, coming near.*

She awoke early with a headache and burning eyes. The pale after-image of an immense cataract flamed across her vision with every blink.

Time was a deathwatch.

Dully, she went up to Ecologarium Twelve, fighting vertigo as she walked the corridors. She felt she was only half here, with each step she risked falling out of the ship. Twelve was large enough to generate its own weather, and when she saw the downpour inside, she stripped and stepped naked from the service vestibule. The chilly, refreshing drops pelted her; she heard the racing notes of an undulating piano étude. As the rain lightened and stopped, she felt as cleansed as the shimmering air. The étude poured streamlike into the woody, tropical textures of gamelan. A cicada chirred.

She lost herself in gardening, tending to the bonsai bordering an open arc of lawn behind the pond. Drones cared for most of the precious miniature trees, but a few were always left for the monitors. She spent most of her time on a two hundred year old hibiscus, which required unpotting so that she could trim back and rewire the taproot and its branches, and pluck out many of the roothairs. Just working on something so long-lived filled her with reverence.

She had been aware of the koi thrashing about in the pond, agitated by the drones that were harvesting their eggs for the deep-freeze, when the mood about her changed. She looked around.

Kayla was sitting on the rock embankment that abutted the pond, watching her with interest. Melita went cold, but no amount of will would make Kayla vanish.

"You are very whole," she observed, drawing up her legs and resting her chin on her knees. "Is why I—I mean *she*—wanted you much, her incompletedness of rhythm was an unsong for her. She named you her . . . voice? . . . ah, *anchor*."

"No, please, go away." Melita glanced down. "You frighten me!" Her outburst caught Ike's attention.

"No, *you* frighten *you*." She pointed at herself. "I am Kayla-the-Other, not she. I am whole, you are my anchor not. Whole on whole we meet."

She held her hands up, slowly put them together, fingers interlocking. "I need you need me."

The Other stood and walked over to her, resting a hand on her shoulder. Melita could not resist looking into her eyes.

"Together we free us." Kayla-O shrugged. "Else. . . ? Bitterly alone we drain our days into void. You *know* the achly empty!"

"But I can't help you!" Melita cried.

To Ike, watching through the holocam of a drone, Melita seemed to carry on a schizophrenic chat with herself. *Firefall* was close enough for the Presence to contact Melita directly, Ike concluded, and with no misgivings ordered a medibot up from sick bay.

Kayla-O smiled wistfully. The liquid night of her eyes reached out and engulfed Melita, and the blueward-shifted bowl of the heavens encircled by the starbow became a glassine ballroom floor parqueted by the vast architecture of the galaxy. *You have come at last*, sang Kayla-O, her words like honey on Melita's tongue, her touch an orgasm; but even though she joined Kayla-O's dance and wheeled with her along the rim of the starbow, still her thoughts focused on the unavoidable equation of doom:

Now after great Darkness this light, and the Exile is lost no more!

—We're going to kill you for sure!

The soul of one whom we adore blazes in the starven blight of this void; her voice sings pure!

—We have lured you to your death.

That Great Silence no longer abides within us—ah! her Voice's Breath! Mingling our desires in this liturgy!

—It is certain you will not survive!

This Love-born power as our fields Merge! No greater gift can Life receive!

—We're going to kill you—I grieve!

"Even yet you understand not," Kayla-O said as they clung to each other in starry space. *"Come to here."* She pointed, and they walked the pathway of light that extended from her finger to Number Twelve's bonsai clearing. They sat naked before each other.

Melita cringed—from herself? From Kayla? From Kayla-O?

"You me let heal," Kayla-O said, *"undo halfness, trust in your heart awake, I will not die but you heal, free me"*—

"Melita!" Ike commanded.

She knew she was committed before she looked back at the the many-armed medibot rolling smoothly on its treads over the grass. It halted a respectful distance away, an injector held ready to sedate her, the pattern displayed on its read-out screen telling her she was receiving a bioscan.

"I'm fine, Ike," she said, not wanting this distraction. "Just watch."

"I'll be the judge of that," answered the aicom, but waited. She looked at Kayla-O.

"Come and you will know," the Other said.

Melita could not deny her compassion for the alien. Through no one's fault, she was the doom-bringer, but though no blame could possibly befall her, her conscience allowed no peace. *Rationalizations,* it kept telling her.

What Kayla-O asked for seemed a paltry thing in comparison, a wish so easy to grant—but which only she, like an executioner, *could* grant; and as afraid as she was, Melita wanted to give it.

Yes! her heart cried, and it felt right. To meet Kayla-O was to meet herself, to put to rest the eidolon by knowing it and forgiving herself.

That small opening was the anchor for the bridge that flashed into existence between them. She could feel it in her cells, between every thought: she knew too much, an intimate knowledge other than herself but like an independent thought in its own right: a voice which had once been outside her now lodged in her own brain: Kayla-O's voice windlike moaning against the window of her soul.

Had she somehow come to the nexus chamber? She could hear the background noise of the universe—but no, it was not the hiss and chatter of static or primal thrum of the Big Bang, but rising and falling swells of discordant orchestral notes. She sought, found patterns in the chaos that crystallized into an elegiac tune.

Her human mind could not contain that prismatic experience with any kind of order. She was a flatlander attempting to conceive of three dimensions and always ending up with two. *Away, turn away!* was her immediate fear, but she had given herself to trust and must let go.

And did not fall. Did not dissolve. Did not collapse in ecstasy. Melita touched the face of the deep, and touched herself. Notes poured from a Japanese koto and flocked around the melody of a Chinese viol. She looked around her with full awareness. Here were the bonsai—the banyan was lovely, the pine like a wizened old philosopher—and there the medibot, perfect in its creator's purpose. Every cell in her awakened with a consciousness all its own; each was a star in the galactic firmament; then a galaxy; then countless legions of her own ancestral line; and then of Kayla-O's. Delightedly she saw it was also like the branchings of a bonsai growing through her consciousness, as rooted and sturdy as anything living can be.

She relived that memory of Kayla-O's singing universe, its anguish receding as she was trapped in the gravitonic tropism and the pariahhood that came: tethered by another space, never to know companions save by their remote songs. Pulling, *pulling!* to break the bindings of this voiceless otherworld, then, exhausted and lost to the nourishment that came from others like light from the waiting Suns, dead matter drifting.

Melita smiled. It was so simple! Time was *not* a deathwatch.

"You understand. I am glad."

Her eyes drank in the smile of Kayla-O's image—a benediction.

"I do."

Something shattered in Melita, a sound like a dully struck triangle. The glass-like pane with Kayla's ice-hard face splintered, shards melting like hoarfrost in a warm wind.

Kayla-O's image winked out.

"Thank you," she said.

It is good to be free, the crescendo of that voice replied.

"Melita, what's happening?" Ike asked, puzzled by its readings, which one moment had shown dangerously accelerated heart action and a near-psychotic brain scan, but now everything nominal.

Melita got easily to her feet.

"You'll understand when we link up," she said gently.

It was not as simple as that. Melita felt the loss of another's voice, gone from this universe, but could console herself with its remnant still singing in her thoughts. The sadness had left her, and she no longer blamed herself: She was freeing a voice that it might sing again.

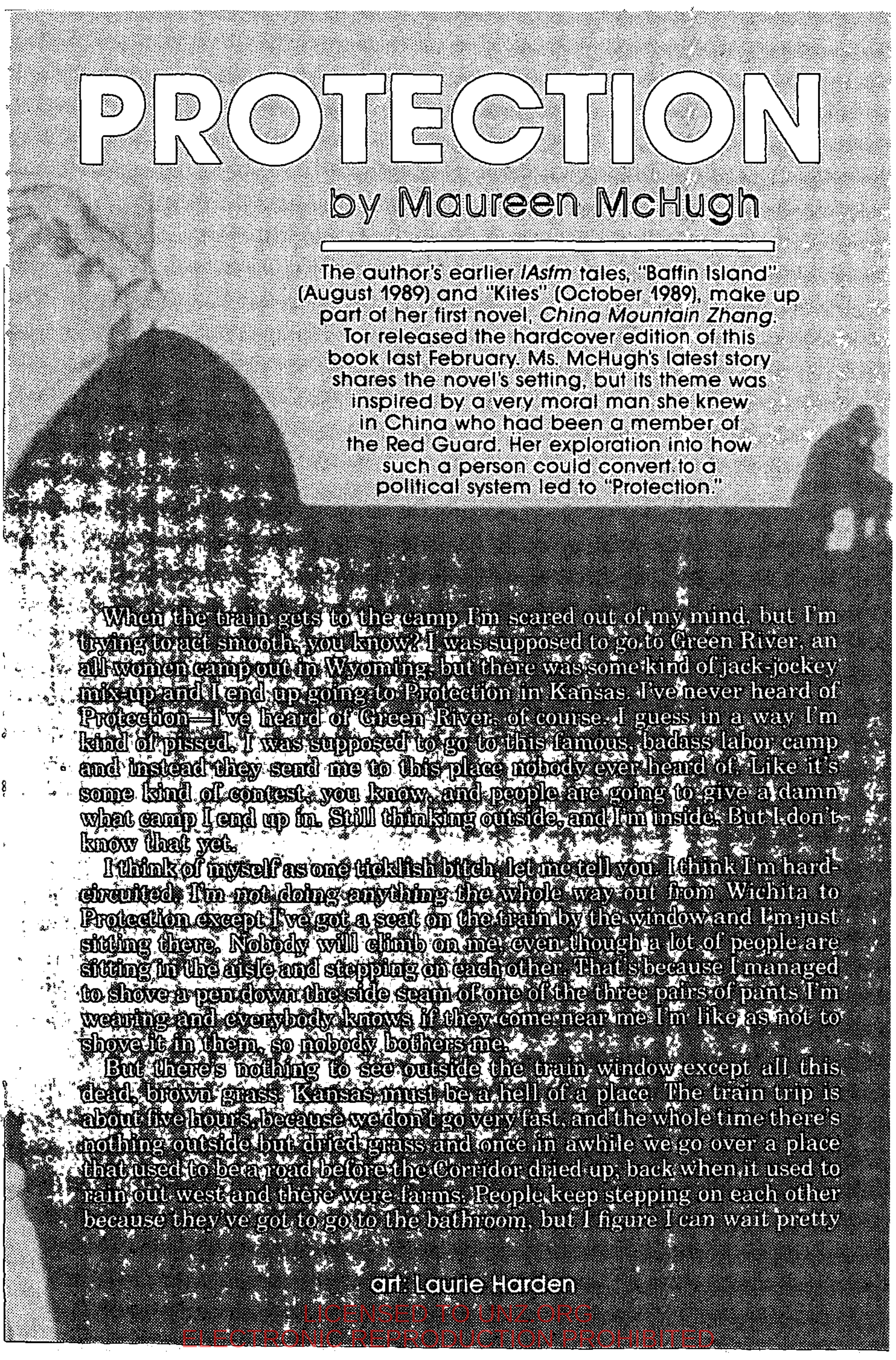
The dust cloud was consumed a full shipday before the actual collision, creating a spectacular display of streamered and confettied fireworks against the ram field. Long before then Kayla-the-Other had withdrawn her hyperspherical self into a particle-sized nub to await *Firefall*'s liberating gravity warp. Gravity had sucked a piece of her into this flat space, now it would cut the hated knot binding her and release her back into song.

Melita felt it. Where she had known a long humming chord like flossed gold braid joining them, now in her synesthesic omnibus of the uppenout came a countless sprinkling of lights that tinkled and, like drops from a spring shower, fell into the great lagoon of the stars until only one soprano note of exaltation remained:

Good-bye, Leeta. Dream of me!

It sustained her through the completion of her opus, to which, joyful as she was, she found she could not bear to listen. When the proper time came and she roused him from his dream cocoon, Nick Bose was startled by the intensity with which she greeted him.

She cupped his cheek in her palm and gazed longingly into his large brown Indian eyes. Her touch said what needed no speaking: Help me come home from out there. Later, after she had retired to her own long sleep, the aicom played *Kayla Lost* for him. He marveled, and understood.●



PROTECTION

by Maureen McHugh

The author's earlier *IAsfm* tales, "Baffin Island" (August 1989) and "Kites" (October 1989), make up part of her first novel, *China Mountain Zhang*. Tor released the hardcover edition of this book last February. Ms. McHugh's latest story shares the novel's setting, but its theme was inspired by a very moral man she knew in China who had been a member of the Red Guard. Her exploration into how such a person could convert to a political system led to "Protection."

When the train gets to the camp I'm scared out of my mind, but I'm trying to act smooth, you know? I was supposed to go to Green River, an all women camp out in Wyoming, but there was some kind of jack-jockey mix-up and I end up going to Protection in Kansas. I've never heard of Protection—I've heard of Green River, of course. I guess in a way I'm kind of pissed. I was supposed to go to this famous, badass labor camp and instead they send me to this place nobody ever heard of. Like it's some kind of contest, you know, and people are going to give a damn what camp I end up in. Still thinking outside, and I'm inside. But I don't know that yet.

I think of myself as one ticklish bitch, let me tell you. I think I'm hard-circuited. I'm *not* doing anything the whole way out from Wichita to Protection except I've got a seat on the train by the window and I'm just sitting there. Nobody will climb on me, even though a lot of people are sitting in the aisle and stepping on each other. That's because I managed to shove a pen down the side seam of one of the three pairs of pants I'm wearing and everybody knows if they come near me I'm like as not to shove it in them, so nobody bothers me.

But there's nothing to see outside the train window except all this dead, brown grass. Kansas must be a hell of a place. The train trip is about five hours, because we don't go very fast, and the whole time there's nothing outside but dried grass and once in awhile we go over a place that used to be a road before the Corridor dried up, back when it used to rain out west and there were farms. People keep stepping on each other because they've got to go to the bathroom, but I figure I can wait pretty

art: Laurie Harden

long because I know the moment I get up someone is going to have my seat.

We all look real wonderful. They let us keep our clothes, which kind of surprised me; I thought they'd make us wear gray coveralls or something, but all they did was shave the back of our heads and put these implants in. I don't know what they're for. Maybe they can always tell where we are—hell, maybe they can tell what we're thinking. Anybody who'd had their metabolism stabilized was destabalized, too. I guess nobody worries about being overweight in a labor camp. The back of my head itches, and I've been wearing these clothes for two weeks. I'm wearing like three of everything, it looks really stupid and it's hot. I worried about that, you know, you want to look smooth, but when they told us that we could only keep what we had on I thought it might take me awhile to get out. I mean, I'll probably bust out before winter, you know? But just in case. And since I don't know what the hell I'll be doing when I get out, I think I better have extra clothes. It's not like the officials don't know I intend to be out, they probably assume everybody wants to get out, and when I do they're not going to let me just buy an Amtrak ticket home, I could spend a lot of time getting back to Cleveland. I may have to walk part of the way, and that could take a hell of a long time, so I could be really glad I kept this stuff.

So we get to Protection. It's nothing, not even fence, just this concrete platform as long as the train and a dirt road and dead grass. The train stops and we sit. I figure it's got to be Protection, what else would be out here? Where else would a convict train go?

After we sit for awhile, maybe twenty minutes in the train with the blowers off, sweating, and far off I see this plume of brown smoke. Except it's not smoke, it's dust, and it's coming off the road. Buses, bunches of them. A whole long elephant trail of dark green buses, humping up and down these kind of rolling hills. Until now I never knew what they meant by rolling hills, but they're like ripples, all covered with dust-colored dead grass. They stop on the road, the first one is almost nose up against the platform. It's a gas bus, with a big methane gas bag on top, half inflated, kind of sagging in a cage. I never saw one before, we don't have them in Cleveland. Guards in army colored coveralls get off the buses, lots of heavy arsenal swinging around. Deal guns, which isn't what I expected, I thought they'd have projectile weapons, but what do I know? Maybe disruptive guns are less messy, that's why city cops use them. But out here in a labor camp, who cares if they bloody up the landscape?

They fiddle around for a moment, crack the door on our car and three of them charge in screaming at us not to move and swinging those deal guns. Hey, I'm not going anywhere, not until I find out what's going on. "You're going to go out on the platform, in two lines! You assholes understand me?" this woman is screaming at us. "I been working out here in this goddamn place for five years, maybe if I kill enough of you they'll think I can't be trusted and transfer me somewhere, so I'm looking for an excuse! Now move!"

So we start streaming off our train car, all up and down the platform the other train cars are doing the same. When I get to the door, a guard signals I should get in the left line so I do. There doesn't seem to be any difference between the left and right line. So there we all are, all lined up, and it's hot and I gotta go to the bathroom.

They make us stand there in the sun while they prowl up and down the platform. Yeah, I'm getting scared. I know what's going on, I know what I'd do in a situation like this. If I had a bunch of scum to take care of, first thing I'd do is show them what a badass I was. So we stand and I wonder what they're going to do to us.

Finally the woman who was head screamer stops in front of our two lines. I think of her as "Helga." "You," she points that deal gun at a guy in the right line. Tall, skinny looking guy, the kind who didn't get a seat. He doesn't have any expression on his face at all, almost like he expected this. "GET UP HERE!" she screams. He shambles forward. He's got his ankles shackled, they only do that for psychos and politics; they wouldn't pull a psycho out of the line unless they were going to roast him, besides, he just doesn't act psycho, so I figure he's politics. They probably don't mind roasting a politics, either.

"TURN AROUND," she screams. He does what he's told so he's standing with his back to us. "You shitheads like his haircut? Well, let me tell you, the perimeter of the camp is wired." All up and down the platform every car is getting the same thing screamed at them. I look back at the guy, his hair is kind of long so it covers part of the shaved place. "I'm going to show you what happens if you cross the perimeter."

She puts her hand in his back and shoves him off the platform and he falls off, hands out, flat into the dust around the concrete. "WALK!" she screams at him. I'm leaving out a lot of what she called us, just because it was pretty much the same thing over and over. Anyway, he struggles to his feet and looks up at her.

"Why should I walk if you're going to kill me anyway?" he says in this normal, reasonable way. You can tell he's scared, but his voice is just as nice and adult.

I like people who give the world lip.

"WALK!" she screams at him and shoves her deal gun in his face, so he kind of stumbles back, then suddenly his whole body goes stiff. Like a board. All the muscles in his neck stand out and his hands make claws and he falls over like a frigging tree, straight. Then he goes all loose.

I look up and down the platform, except for one guy who they're having to push, all up and down are these people lying in the brown grass. Two guards hop down and I catch my breath expecting them to keel over, too, but they just pick up the guy by his arms and legs and sling him on the bus.

"Cross it often enough and you'll fry your frigging brains to scrambled eggs," the woman says with satisfaction. "That is, if any of you assholes have brains."

We don't get on the bus until Helga has told us the rules, which takes forever. When we get on our bus nobody wants to sit next to Political but he's sitting near the front so I do. Buses make me sick, the closer I am to the front the better off I am. He's still out, head against the window, and I have to move him to sit down. He has nice clothes, real ragged but good stuff, Chinese or something. He's wearing a sweater and pants and under the dust they're both this kind of maroon color, with little flecks of gray in them. They've taken the shackles off and thrown them back on the train. He's got real long fingers. Something about him I like, maybe it's the way he turned around and talked to Helga. I could understand if he got mad or freaked, but he was just real reasonable.

Everybody is looking at me because I sat down next to Political, everybody knows he's already marked for trouble. I figure if I don't care it marks me as a real hard-circuit and then nobody will bother me.

Besides, something about him really attracts me, so I figure he's mine.

He doesn't really come to in the time it takes us to get to the camp, so I have to sling his arm over my shoulders and half-carry him out of the bus. I'm not that big a girl. He's skinny, but 180, maybe 190 centimeters and weighs more than I do. He's not completely out, and I keep talking to him. His eyes are barely open. "Come on," I say, "steps, get your feet under you, you son of a bitch or they'll take it out on my kidneys." I just keep pressing on him, get him down the steps and into the barracks. The barracks are new, concrete block and the beds are just like metal bookshelves. I sling him into a bottom bunk and take a middle one. I watch everybody else mill around before settling in.

Scared, man I'm scared. I sure as hell didn't want a mixed camp, in a woman's camp it's not like I'll be out-massed by over half the inmates. On the bus it was about two guys to every woman. Men are bigger, the only hope I have is to get a reputation as crazy, or else to come up with something everybody needs. Worrying about Politics gives me something to do other than worry about myself. The only time I leave is to go to the bucket. I never pissed in a metal bucket before, it's an experience, not to mention that it's loud. They turn the lights out before I get back to my bunk, which is also exciting.

I don't sleep that night. I want to be in a real bed. I want to brush my teeth. I know that's a bad way to think, 'cause when I did two years of juvenile reform, I learned, you don't think about what you miss—and it isn't really as good as you remember it anyway. Hell, most of the time I sleep on someone's couch, or floor. But it's different.

It's still dark when the lights come back on. Helga told us we have half an hour in the morning, then roll call, then breakfast. I don't know what the hell the half an hour is for, most everybody spends it sleeping. I hop down out of my bunk—Goddamn Marx and Lenin, every bone in my body aches from sleeping on a metal bookshelf—and check Politics. Most of the night he was just sprawled the way he landed, one leg half off, but now he's curled up like he's cold. He moved, I figure that's a good sign.

"Hey," I shake him gently. "Come on, wake up." For the first time it occurs to me that maybe he's brain damaged. Helga made it sound as if you had to do it a couple of times, but how do I know? I don't want him to be brain damaged, I need him. "Come on," I say, "look at me. Politics, look at me."

He groans and opens his eyes.

"Come on," I say, "sit up."

He sits up and grabs his head with those long fingers. Spider fingers.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Paul," he says. Well, at least he understands.

"I'm Janee," I say, "and we're going to stick together, okay Paul?" If he's brain damaged I'll ditch him later.

He looks at me; his head is really killing him, but the way he looks at me, kind of judging, figuring, and I think, well, if he's brain damaged he must have been a genius before. "Janee," he says, hoarse sounding. "Okay, Janee."

I prowl up and down the barracks. Out in the yard is an old fashioned water spigot. I don't have anything to get water in, not even a juice bulb, but I open the door—it's dark and clear, the stars are still bright except off to the east—and check. The perimeter is brightly lit but our door isn't locked and I don't see anyone walking a beat. I sneak out to the spigot.

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It's got weeds right around the base, then the rest of the ground is dry and cracked. It's real hard to turn on, and the water comes out in a trickle. I soak the outermost shirt I'm wearing, rinse it out real good, then bring it back in. I crawl into Paul's bunk and hand him the shirt.

"It's wet," he says, sounding surprised.

"There's a spigot outside."

He wipes his face and holds it against his forehead. "Thanks, Janee," he says.

"I told you, we stick together."

"You don't want to stick with me," he says. "I'm political."

"Yeah, I know," I say. "I'll let you know when it's a problem."

The guy in the bottom bunk across from Paul's is watching us. I look right at him, then give him a long, slow, skitzy smile. He looks away first. Little victories.

The camp is hell. That's all there is to it. And Protection isn't as bad as Green River, or so they say. I can't see how that could be true. All the time I'm hungry, and either too hot or too cold. My bones hurt from sleeping on a shelf. I figure out the reason why the lights go on half-an-hour early, so we can lie there hungry and dread the day. We get up every morning and wait half-an-hour to go out to roll call. Roll call takes twenty minutes if there's no lecture, and then we get twenty minutes for breakfast. The first day we are all given a cup, a bowl, and a spoon. We march in lines to the mess, which is just a roof, no walls. For breakfast we get something that's mostly water and a steamed roll. And coffee, if you can call it that. When they pour the soup stuff into my bowl I think it's some kind of yeast soup, it's just brown watery slop. It doesn't have much taste. In the bottom are a couple of tablespoons of barley or something. The coffee is clear, like tea.

I look at it, ten years of this if I don't figure out how to cross that perimeter. This is day one. I have 3,650 days, plus a couple of leap days.

Paul gets his and goes to a pole holding up the roof and squats down sliding against it. He hasn't bothered to get coffee, I can't understand it, I'm so dry I could drink a gallon and I got water in the morning at the spigot. He hands me his bowl.

"What," I say.

"I can't eat it," he says.

"You got to," I say.

"I'll get sick," he says. Then with this kind of sickly smile, "I like mine with milk and sugar anyway."

"What is it?" I ask.

"Oatmeal," he says.

Oatmeal? I sniff at it. It does smell sort of like oatmeal. I take his cup and pour some of the liquid into it. "You've got to have something in your stomach."

"I'll get sick," he says.

"So you get sick. Maybe then you'll feel better."

"It's not a hangover," he says. But while I'm eating our breakfast, he drinks it. I stash the rolls in my bag, I could eat them but I figure he's going to get hungry eventually.

That first day we go to the "factory" and learn how to stitch quilts on these old black sewing machines with "Singer" on them in gold letters. I guess because of the noise they make, although it doesn't sound like singing to me. I sit next to Paul. We put the backs on, the blank, not-pretty parts. We're supposed to finish three an hour. I don't know jackshit about sewing, I mean, I didn't sit around doing this a whole lot, you know? So I ruin the first one, big time, and the second one looks like hell, but the third one isn't too bad. It's not hard, just, ziiiip, up one side, ziiiip, across the top, ziiiip, ziiiip, side and bottom, a big square.

The first day Paul is so sick he's lucky to be able to do one an hour. By the third day we're doing six an hour, but that first day I can do two extra for Paul. The problem is getting them into his basket without getting caught. He doesn't say anything about my doing them. His basket is always the first one they check.

I think I'm pretty fast at making quilts. It never hurts to be good at something. But that day and the next day, I don't push, there's no reason to work any harder than I have to.

By the third day Paul's doing as well as anyone, long spider fingers aren't shaking anymore.

We work until two-thirty, then we get a twenty minute break, then we work until seven. By dinner I'm so empty I echo. We stand in the wind with our plates and cups. Dinner is two rolls each, pale beans with a bit of white pork fat and bitter coffee.

The second day, Paul says we should pick grass and use it in our bunks, but it's hard to find much in the camp. That's the problem with politicals, people like that are always thinking, but the stuff never works in the real world.

The third day they let us mix with the people who've been here for awhile.

I know we're in trouble when Paul and I squat down by our pole. I happen to look around and most of the guards are gone, only a string left to protect the mess cooks, who are turning the stinking stuff they use to rinse the kettles onto the ground. "Hey," I say.

Paul looks up.

The walking dead are headed toward us. All these skinny people in filthy clothes, maybe fifty of them. The first time, I don't know catshit about the walking dead, I think everybody looks like that after they've been here awhile and I feel sick. I'm still planning to get out of here before winter, but the business of crossing the perimeter is a real problem, and besides, it's beginning to dawn on me that I'm not going to just walk to St. Louis and hitch a ride on a transport.

"Keep eating," I whisper to Paul, so we do. When they get to the edge of the mess I notice that the last of the guards and the cook detail are disappearing. I keep eating. The first dead gets to a guy who's holding his half-empty bowl and without much ado, kicks him in the ribs, and two of them fall on top of the guy, steal his food.

They start moving through and jumping people. They don't jump everybody, somebody looks big, they just go around them. Man, I've got to do something. Some of them have sticks and I think to myself, I got to find out where they get those sticks. The walking dead don't make much noise. They're either all nuts or they're trying to scare people. It's creepy, watching them come through. I got a feeling that Paul and I are people they'll press.

I've got to do something. We're going to lose our dinner no matter what we do. I could just put down my bowl and then maybe they wouldn't touch us, but that's a bad thing to do. You don't give in, or you become a pushover. So I've got to make myself so much trouble that after this they don't mess with me.

So I look right into the face of one skinny bastard walking towards me and I smile. Then I start screaming and running, right at him, just screaming as loud as I can, and battering at him with my bowl, beans spattering. It wasn't exactly what he expected, he's not ready for some lunatic and I get him down, one hand pressed against his throat and keep hitting him in the face with my bowl.

Then another one of them grabs my arms and tries to pull me off. They're real skinny, these walking dead, and I'm all pumped up, so he's having real trouble, even with the one I'm sitting on struggling like mad. Then Paul tries to grab the one pulling on me, and a guy named Carlos starts whacking on the one Paul is pulling on (which is good because Paul is a lousy fighter).

I guess that's when the guards decide enough is enough and start moving in, swinging the butts of the deal guns. I end up with a split lip and a black eye and the next morning all of us in the fight have to stand for an extra hour and miss breakfast—plus, we're not supposed to get behind on our quota of quilts even though we missed forty minutes. But I also get a stick one of the walking dead dropped. And I have a good idea people are pretty much going to leave me alone.

My Paul. My Paul. He has long spider fingers and his skin is so thin you can see the copper-green stain of his neural jacks on his wrists. He never asks what I did to end up in a reform through labor camp. "Don't you want to know?" I ask, curled up against him in our bunk.

"No," he says, "that's outside, we're inside."

He was a history teacher, a middle school teacher I think. He's older than I am, I'm twenty-three and he's almost thirty. He's here for twenty years, I'm here for ten. He wouldn't have a chance if it wasn't for me, he doesn't have the first idea how to protect himself and he's a Political, that makes him a target because the guards don't care what happens to a Political. Nobody messes with him now, because everybody knows that Janee is crazy. Sometimes if I'm careful I can hook an extra bun and split it with him. I wonder about his life outside. "Did you have a girlfriend?" I ask. "Where did you live? What kind of flat did you have?" He's from Pennsylvania, I think. "Did you have any brothers and sisters?"

"That's outside, Janee, it doesn't matter here."

He sounds like our political instruction meetings. Our old lives are outside, now, inside, we have a chance to put together new lives.

We have political instruction meetings a couple of times a week, the twelve rules are painted on the wall of the barracks.

#1. We are not strong enough ourselves, we must rely on a power greater than ourselves.

A power greater than ourselves is society, of course. The first time we go there's this lecture, about how we are all maladjusted, and how we are denying that we are maladjusted. And the first thing we have to do is admit that we are. So we have to go all around the room and stand up and say our first name and what our problem is. Well, Catalano, one of the guards, is standing there, so everybody mostly just stands up and says their name and why they are there.

First couple of guys aren't much, they stand up and say things like, "My name is Derrick and I am a thief."

But then it gets to be a contest. Guys stand up and we kind of hold our breath to find out what sort of badass crime they'd committed. If a guy stands up and says he's a thief or a pimp or that he's in for assault everybody just sits there. But then this guy gets up, just a normal looking guy, not very big, and he says, "My name is Vincent, not Vinny, *Vincent.* And I am a hijacker."

Everything gets real quiet. Even though the guy is supposed to sit down he sort of smiles and says, "I hijacked a city bus and killed the driver."

"That's enough," Natalie says. She's a prisoner too, but she's been here for years, and so she leads our political discussion group. She knows that Vincent is putting the whammy on us, and she makes a little note in this notebook she carries.

Some people stand up and say their crimes real fast and sit down. One woman, she's in for prostitution, but she's not a hard case, you can tell. Maybe some smalltown girl who puts out, who got somebody bothered. She stands up and she's crying and she says in this real little voice, real fast, "MynameisNancyandI'maprostitute," and sits down.

But Natalie makes her stand back up, and there she is crying, and makes her say it again, slower. Nobody can understand what she's saying, she's scared so bad and crying so hard. It's just mean to make her stand up, a little piece of white meat like that, 'cause the little girl knows, and she's right, that these guys are going to be all over her once lights are out.

But I'm thinking about my reputation. I'm only in for larceny and assault, which isn't going to sound like much. And I've got a reputation between me and big trouble.

Paul doesn't have to stand up and say anything, politicals aren't allowed to say anything in political instruction for the first two years, which is another weird rule. You'd think they'd need it worse than us.

So I'm thinking, while it gets closer and closer to my turn, and finally I've got to stand up. I stand up and stand there a moment, thinking if I really want to go through with this, and just before Natalie says something, because I can see she's going to, I say, "My name is Janee, and my problem is that I'm stuck in this goddamn camp." And I sit down.

A lot of guys laugh and a couple of them whistle and I don't smile or anything. Catalano, the guard, reverses his deal gun and starts coming toward me, so I stand back up and say, "I'm *in* for larceny and assault." Which makes it sound like there might be other stuff that they never got on me. And then I sit down and Natalie scribbles in her little book.

The next morning, Vincent and I have to stand at roll call for an extra forty minutes, which was what Natalie was scribbling down. But Paul hooks an extra roll at breakfast, and gives me his and the extra. I'm real proud of him, he's learning a little, too.

At break he tells me that the political study is based on Alcoholics Anonymous.

"Give me a break," I say. "Alcoholics Anonymous isn't about politics."

"No," he says, "it's about changing behavior. They use most of the old rules, maybe change them a little. Rule No. 1, about relying on a power greater than ourselves, that's straight from AA. Except that traditionally the power greater than ourselves was God, not society."

"I knew they meant society," I say, he probably thinks I'm stupid, and I'm not, I know a lot more about staying alive than some goddamn history teacher.

But he isn't paying any attention at all. "It backfired big time last night," he says. "You and Vincent." He grins at me. I thought he might not understand about what I did, he didn't say anything when we crawled into our bunk the night before, but he does, he thinks it's all right.

I gotta think about getting out. Paul keeps shaking his head every time I say something about it. "How are you going to get across the perimeter?" he asks.

"I got in," I say.

"Are you going to wait until there's a shipment of new prisoners and then just walk past them?" he says. Which is a point. I don't know if the whole perimeter shuts off when prisoners come in or not.

"I can test it," I say.

"Fry your brains?" he says.

"Nah," I say, "shove one of the walking dead across."

He laughs, but I'm serious. The walking dead don't care about each other, they don't care about anything. I can go snag me a walking dead and the others will just look at me.

So I'm waiting. The only problem is that it isn't like they post an arrival schedule for new prisoners. The first time we get new prisoners, we're inside sewing quilts. We come out for dinner, and there are new people, so we have to wait because we can't mix with them. Standing there in the wind, shivering, while these stupid people, looking even stupider with the backs of their heads still new-shaved, are getting their dinner.

But it's early October, I think, and we're out for our break and somebody says, "Look."

There are a couple of the big green buses, rolling up to the perimeter. I start up, look around, can I get to one of the walking dead before the perimeter gets back up? Walking dead don't wander far from their factory work room. I can't even imagine one of them working. Most of them are in group six, which is officially the group for incorrigibles. Group six is pretty far from us, we're group thirty-six.

I don't see how I can get to one and back, I look back at the perimeter, the first bus slows down and then speeds up and crosses. There are bunches of guards and deal guns at the road, but nothing between us and the perimeter. Maybe I should just try it? Helga made it sound like I'd have to get fried a couple of times before it would hurt me permanently.

But this guy in Group thirty-three makes his decision before me, takes out running for the perimeter, away from the buses and the guards. I look back at the guards, expecting them to start firing. Deal guns aren't real accurate if you're too far away, he might still make it.

But they don't do anything. That tells me right there. I should have known, they'd be guarding if the whole perimeter went down. We all sit and watch the guy, he hits the perimeter, it's just a bunch of white stakes with a string about ankle high, just to mark it. He leaps the wire and goes down. We can see him spasm in the grass, just beyond the wire.

The guards aren't in any hurry. After awhile two of them finally walk from the road across the compound to the guy.

It's time for us to be called back inside to sew more quilts, but the loudspeakers are still quiet, just that hum that means they're on. I look up at Natalie, who is supposed to be calling us back inside and she's looking at her feet.

This is a lesson I guess. I figure they're going to roast the guy.

The guards walk across the perimeter like it wasn't even there. It's not for them. They grab the guy by the arms and drop him across the wire, and walk back, leaving him there.

"What are they—" I say. But I know.

"They're leaving him to fry," Paul says.

Right. "Can he feel anything?" I ask.

Paul doesn't say anything for a moment. "No," he says finally, "probably not."

We sit out there for a long time, Natalie looking at her feet, some of us watching the guy. Every so often he jerks around for awhile and stops. Finally we go in to work until dinner, and when we come out to get our slop, the poor sucker is gone.

It's not going to stop me, you know? There's always a way. Once I get out of Protection, all I got to do is get to Saint Louis, then I can hitch with a transport and be in Cleveland in no time. In Cleveland I know some people who'll hide me.

People get in, people can get out.

But it dawns on me that it's getting on to winter and I'm not real sure about my chances of getting to Saint Louis in the winter. Besides, if I winter over in Protection, then the hair on the back of my head will grow out better and I won't look so much like a goddamn escapee. My clothes'll get worse, but maybe next spring I can steal the clothes off a newcomer. And during the winter I can watch and plan, so I can figure how to get out of here.

Anyway, if I'm going to be spending the winter here, I've got to start playing the game different. Got to work the system a little better, score some points with the guards and the upper orders, you know? When I was in juvenile detention they made a big thing about political instruction, so I try to pay attention.

Thing is, all that stuff about ideology and infrastructure and shit goes right over my head. And Natalie is always asking me things like, "Why are we here in Protection?"

"Cause we screwed up," I say.

Natalie shakes her head and asks somebody else and they answer with one of those slogan kind of answers about society and bourgeois mal-a-dap-ta-tion. And I look at Paul and roll my eyes. I can't keep this stuff in my head. I mean, it's all just words that don't mean anything. I can't understand why anyone would ever get in political trouble because none of it ever seems to mean anything. Maybe if I'd finished high school it would be easier.

I can't figure out what's so awful about capitalism in the first place. Back when America had capitalism we were rich and powerful. Now we're not. So isn't capitalism better?

One night I wait until lights out and I ask Paul.

He laughs. "It's not that simple, Janee."

"So why not," I whisper.

"Because we lost our power while we were still capitalist. You've heard about the Second Depression."

Sort of. "When New York City used to turn off the electricity at night?" I used to watch this show called "Stormtime," it was real popular, with that cute guy, Sam Basarico. They were always turning the electricity off and people always had to go to the hospital in the middle of the night or die, and Sam Basarico was always waking up doctors and stuff.

"Yeah," he says.

"So," I say.

"So what?" he says.

"So what's wrong with capitalism?"

He sighs. For a minute I wonder if maybe he's a capitalist. But then he says, "It's not a fair system."

"That's stupid," I say. Things aren't fair. Only little kids expect things to be fair.

"I'm tired," Paul says. "Go to sleep."

"No," I say, and start kinda making up to him, scrunching up against him, playing with him. And when he's starting to get all hot I say, "You want to go to sleep?"

"Jesus, Janee," he whispers. So we hump a little in the dark. I should be worried about getting pregnant. I wonder what they do if someone gets pregnant? But I haven't had a period since I got to the camp, which is strange. Maybe the implant.

"Okay," I say, "now tell me about capitalism and what's wrong with it."

"Tomorrow."

"No," I say.

And the guy on the rack above us hisses, "You two shut up!"

So we're quiet for awhile and then I say real close to Paul's ear—he's falling asleep and I'm tired, too, but you can't give up on stuff like this—"Come on, tell me about capitalism."

"If we talk politics, I'll get in trouble and you'll get in trouble," he says.

"If I don't figure out how to say the right stuff in political instruction I'm going to get in trouble anyway."

He kind of laughs. I can feel him shake, even though he doesn't make any noise. "Okay," he whispers. "But tomorrow. Go to sleep."

So he starts by asking me what I know about capitalism.

"People were rich and there was a lot of corruption and a lot of crime," I say. "And now we have socialism and people are poor and there's a lot of corruption and a lot of crime."

He laughs. Anything I say about politics makes him laugh.

"You think I'm not that smart," I say. "Just because I'm not book smart."

"You're not stupid, Janee, you just never had much chance."

I don't know how to answer that so I don't say anything, I mean, is it an insult or what? So he tells me about capitalism, and people making money. And he tells me about people having to pay rent for the places they lived. That sounds pretty screwy. People had to pay for water, too. People could sell anything.

I make him tell me how capitalism caused global warming and he tells me all about how people wouldn't give up things because if they stop buying capitalism doesn't work, so the technology and the pollution made the earth heat up and now the whole corridor, Texas and Kansas and Oklahoma and Idaho and all those states that used to have farming don't have enough rainfall. Protection used to be a farming community. Now it never rains.

Which explains a lot of what was wrong with capitalism. I get the idea that people knew all this bad stuff was going to happen, but they wouldn't stop buying gasoline-driven cars and stuff, and the government wouldn't stop them. So now people like me have to suffer for it.

Except none of that helps in political instruction.

"What class are you?" Natalie asks me.

"Proletariat," I say. I know that one, I remember that from when I was still in high school.

Wrong again. None of us know what class we are. Natalie sighs. We're "criminal element." Right, I should have got that.

We have a stove in the barracks, and it's getting real cold at night. I keep hoping that they're going to start heating the place a bit. It's been cold enough that one night water froze. And we may sew quilts all day but we never get to take any of them back to the barracks at night.

"Hey," I say in political instruction, "one of the big differences between capitalism and socialism is that in capitalist times people had to pay for stuff like where they lived and water and heat and all that, right?"

"Yes," Natalie says.

"So if we live in Socialism, how come we don't have heat?"

Natalie scrunches her mouth together in a line, real flat. Paul looks down at his hands. I screwed up again, and I don't even understand why I'm wrong.

Finally Natalie says, "Girl, I'm telling you, you've got an attitude. You should be thinking about working on that."

All my life people have been telling me about my frigging at-ti-tude. Seems to me, a lot of times, my at-ti-tude has been all that's been between me and the world making me part of the pavement. Seems to me, here in Protection, my at-ti-tude is about all I've got.

I'm cold all the time. Out here in Kansas, the wind blows all the time. It's sunny, but the sky is real pale blue and real far away. Natalie says that long about January we'll start getting dust storms.

When the lights come on in the morning, none of us bother to get up. I stay right up against Paul, trying to get a little warm. We got two blankets because they're two of us, but they're really not big enough to cover two people, even when I lie right up against him. Still, we get some overlap. So my legs and feet are cold, and his backside is cold, because those are places where there isn't enough cover, but we're okay.

We take our blankets to the factory, all wrapped up like Indians. If you do it right, part of the time you are sewing a quilt you can have it in your lap, but if they catch us doing that they chew us out. Nancy gets in trouble because when she's finished sewing a quilt, instead of putting it in her basket, she keeps it on her lap.

We've been doing quilts a couple of months, it's not real hard. We're supposed to do twelve an hour, one every five minutes. You got to fold a little, pin a little, then zip, zip, zip, zip, four seams and you go on to the next one. When you run out of thread you have to signal Natalie and she brings you thread. If you don't do twelve an hour, then you have to stand for detention. So I do fourteen or fifteen the first hour, just in case I have a problem, and then twelve an hour for the rest of the day. Our hands get so cold it's hard to do them right. If you make a mistake, the bad quilt is called "waste." I asked if we couldn't keep a couple of the "wastes" to use ourselves but Natalie said that unscrupulous people would ruin quilts on purpose just so they could have them.

Well, yeah, I would.

Then one morning, Corbin, who with Natalie is one of our Group Leaders, says that we're going to have a change. Corbin doesn't have any teeth in front. At first I thought he was real old, but then I found out he's only thirty-six, but he's been in labor camps for fourteen years. I guess that and the fact that his mouth is all caved in from having no teeth is what makes him look old.

He says that there is rationing outside, like there usually is in the winter. It's the first time anyone has mentioned outside in a long time. It seems so far away, outside. I guess there didn't used to be rationing, before the Second Depression, but I guess if they could farm the corridor there would be a lot more food.

From now on, he says, if we make 120 quilts a day, we get regular rations, if we make more than 180 we get extra rations, and if we make less than 120, we get half rations.

I figure maybe I can make 180 quilts, I mean, I've never really tried hard before. I have to make eighteen quilts an hour. The first hour I make nineteen, raggedy-assed things but nineteen and they're good enough to pass, not waste, you know. Man, I figure I got this thing licked, and I'm tasting extra rations. But the next hour I screw up two and I only end up with fifteen. And the third hour I get up to thirteen and the thirteenth one I screw the thread all to hell, tangled in the bobbin and all, and I got to be real careful or I'll break the needle. If I break the needle they'll dock me ten quilts because needles are expensive. I finish the day with 154. Chris, this big guy from Detroit who killed somebody with a top from a trash barrel, he makes 182. His fingers just blur. I'm always afraid that I'm going to end up sewing my own hand if I go that fast.

This other guy, Nesly, he only makes 114. He's just a klutz, he goes real slow and he messes some up. At dinner, Chris gets two extra buns, and I'm disappointed, I thought he'd get more than that. But Nesly only gets half his beans.

We discuss it at our political meeting. First the title of the lesson, "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." Then Natalie has a discussion group and we talk about what it means.

Nesly says, kind of desperate, "It doesn't seem fair, I work as hard as I can."

Maybe he does, I don't know. I don't like Nesly, he's one of those people who you look at and you know they're a screw-up. He's not very big, and he's got no front, no pride. And he whines all the time.

Natalie says, "Think about it, Nesly. People like Chris work harder, they need more food. Society is like a machine. A person like Chris makes sure that more people have blankets. It's for the good of society that if there is only so much food, people like Chris get it, because he's more efficient."

Some people nod. I can see it, in a way.

Mostly I don't care, it's warmer in the bunk, with Paul, and that's where I want to be. I'm tired all the time, from being cold. It seems like I just go to sleep and the lights snap on.

I close my eyes again, not bothering to get up.

Paul says, "You still want to learn more for political instruction?"

"I dunno," I say, and then from habit, because he's doing something I want him to do, "Yeah, I guess."

But he doesn't talk about anything that makes sense, he starts by saying, "What's feudalism?"

"Bad," I say, thinking about how in half an hour I have to go stand out in the cold for roll call. When we have roll call in the morning, the stars are still out and it's still dark.

"Why is it bad?"

Hell, I don't know, I don't even really know what feudalism is except it has to do with kings and queens.

So that morning he tells me about serfs, who were like slaves, because only a few people owned all the land, and everybody else had to work for them. And because if you didn't work for someone you would starve, you'd do anything to work for someone. But they could pay you whatever they wanted.

I think I can understand that pretty well. "People like us," I say, "we're like serfs, because we're trapped, and they don't have to do anything but give us a little food."

"Right," he says, pleased with me. Well hallelujah, Janee finally said something right. "The only difference," he says, "is that a feudal economy is based on land. Since people don't have much money, mostly land, they can't really buy and sell a lot. I mean, you can't carry a hectare of land in your pocket, you know?"

I laugh, because I'm supposed to, but he sounds like a frigging teacher.

"Now a factory is expensive," he says. "You know how animals and people evolve?"

"Like people started out from apes," I say.

"Sort of," he says. "Anyway, first are primitive societies, like the Indians. Then there are feudal societies, which are more organized. And then people get money together and they buy machines and build buildings and you have factories. But to start a factory you have to have a lot of money, you need capital. And that's why people who run factories are called capitalists."

Okay. So out on the field for roll call, while I'm freezing my buns off, I'm thinking about factory workers and serfs. And about labor camps. Paul thinks they're different, because of land and money, but they really aren't. It seems to me that if society is going to evolve, it should get better for everyone, not just the people at the top, right? I mean, Indians had it a lot better than I do.

"Where did you live in Pennsylvania?" I ask Paul.

He doesn't answer.

"Did you live in a big city, like Philadelphia or Pittsburgh?"

He doesn't pay any attention to me.

"Maybe in a little town, like Allentown?" Everybody has heard of Allentown, because it's a famous battleground of class struggle. That and the little town in Kentucky where the miners went on strike. "Did you have a girlfriend?"

"That was outside," he finally says.

"Do you want to know if I had a boyfriend?" I ask.

"I'm sure you did."

"You don't know," I say. "You try to make it sound like you don't care, but you don't know anything about me. Maybe I ax-murdered my boyfriend," I say.

It irritates me, he won't tell me anything. He doesn't want to hear anything about me, either. I mean I don't think it's a good idea to always be talking about it, but it's stupid to pretend that we didn't have any life at all out there. I figure he had a girlfriend, maybe a wife. Sometimes, people divorce people who go into labor camps. It's an okay reason for divorce.

"What's the big secret?" I say. "Why don't you want to talk about it?"

"That's a whole different person," he says, "a whole different life."

"Why don't you ever talk about politics, I mean, you're *here* because of politics."

"I am talking about politics," he says, sounding angry, "I'm teaching you, aren't I?"

"Yeah, but you never teach me anything subversive," I say. "We just talk about feudalism. Natalie doesn't even care about feudalism, I still don't know the right answers when she asks me questions."

"It's not something somebody can explain overnight," he says.

"I don't even think you're right," I say. "You say that feudalism was better than the Indians, and that capitalism was better than feudalism. But it's not, it's just the same for people like me, we always get shit on. Except maybe for the Indians. I'd be better off if I were an Indian."

"That's the point," he says, exasperated. "Feudalism and capitalism exploit people like you and me."

Exploit. That crops up all the time, exploitation of the workers. I feel like I've just gotten another piece of the puzzle.

"So how would you change things, Janee?" he says.

I think. "I'd make sure that . . . I mean, people still have to work, right? Or we wouldn't have anything to eat. But I'd give more to the people like me, like I'd make sure that people had enough to eat and all that. I wouldn't let some people have a lot and not have to work. And I wouldn't make people do stupid things. You know, sewing quilts all the time is boring."

"But how are you going to have factories if no one has enough money to build them?" Paul asks.

He's got a point. I mean, if everybody is pretty much the same, nobody has a whole lot of money. I try to think who builds factories. I get it, all the sudden I get it. "The government. The government can build them."

"Why the government?" he asks.

"Because they've got the money," I say.

"But then the government just becomes like the capitalists, exploiting people."

That's what we've got but I don't say it.

"Think about it, Janee," he says.

Right. He knows the answer, but he wants me to guess, stupid son of a bitch playing stupid teacher games.

If it wasn't for me, the poor sorry bastard would be in real deep shit. I know he thinks I'm stupid, I can tell by the way he talks to me. When he's telling me about politics he talks slower, real careful, and he asks questions he already knows the answers to and there I am, trying to guess the right answer when he could just tell me and then I'd know. And why won't he tell me anything about himself? Why doesn't he want to know anything? 'Cause I don't really matter, that's why. He doesn't need to tell me anything because I'm just dumb old Janee.

"Listen," I say, "what difference does it make? Why the hell can't you just tell me where you lived? Huh? Why do you have to be so goddamn secret about it?"

"What difference does it make where I lived," he says. He's in a pissy mood. When he's like this I'm not supposed to bother him, he kind of sits around and doesn't say anything. What, he thinks he's the only one whose life is screwed up?

"Fine," I say. "You don't want to talk to me? I don't want to talk to you." And I don't talk to him. I just leave him right there and I just start ignoring him from then on, take my blanket, sleep in the goddamn bunk by the door even though it's colder. I mean, I boot Nesly out, make him sleep in the middle bunk so I can have the bottom, I can't let goddamn Nesly sleep better than I do, not even for Paul. And the bunk is the pits, there's a draft in from the door and I've only got one blanket, so I have to sleep curled up in the corner trying to get all of me under the stupid green blanket.

Paul doesn't say anything. He has that way, like he expects shit to happen, like he always expected I'd dump him. And the next morning nobody really bothers him. Nobody really bothers me, either, but then, people *don't* bother me. So we just go through the day, not talking to each other. I even make Nesly sit at my Singer sewing machine, next to Paul. I see people watching, seeing how pissed I am. Seeing if Paul is out there by himself.

At dinner Paul gets in line, he's in front of Marisa, who is okay, and Roy and Sal cut in front of Marisa, which gets her real nervous until they start bumping into Paul and she realizes she's not the target. She looks back at me, I can see her head turn, but I'm making like I'm not really looking. Paul looks back, not knowing what's going on, and says something, and Sal and Roy laugh. So he gets his beans and they get theirs, and I'm still like I'm not watching, and Sal and Roy are leaning on him. I can't hear what they're saying, but I can tell, they're over there by the kettles and now since it's cold there's always like this steam blowing like smoke.

And Paul doesn't know what to do, you can see his shoulders up around his ears and he's all elbows and you can tell that Roy and Sal got him running, but he's holding his beans and shaking his head, and Sal pulls on the plate, but Paul won't let go, so it's kind of a tug of war. Sal's looking a little stupid, and Paul calls to one of the guards, which is a mistake, because it's a guy we call Arkansas who doesn't care what happens as long as he doesn't have to do anything. He's this short little guy with a big Adam's apple and those stupid green guards' uniforms fit him even worse than they fit the other guards. Paul always says Arkansas is an example of too much inbreeding.

Arkansas goes deaf and pretends he doesn't know what's going on and the next thing I know Sal flicks Paul's plate of beans onto Paul's face and shirt. And Sal and Roy are laughing, and I guess it's not as good as getting Paul's beans but it's better than nothing, and Paul yells at Arkansas, "Did you see that! Are you going to let them do that!"

Arkansas sort of half reverses his deal gun, so that the metal stock is out there, like he's going to club someone, and narrows his eyes and says, "Politics, you causing a disturbance?" in this real lazy way.

"I wasn't doing anything—"

"I don't like trouble," Arkansas says.

And Paul must realize that it's open season when you're political, 'cause he doesn't say anything after that.

And I'm pretending not to notice anything. Son of a bitch thinks *I'm* stupid, let him survive out there on his brains.

Things are really different without me being with Paul. I guess I kind of look around. Not that there's a whole lot to see. Kansas looks like hard, pale ripples, and the sky is light blue, real far away. The barracks are all in lines and they're low and long and even though they were painted green, now they're just all washed out, a kind of darker Kansas color. The only colors are the guards' uniforms, which are dark green, all stamped The U.S. People's Army over the pockets.

I feel so small. It was okay when I was busy watching everybody in group thirty-six and worrying about Paul, but now I feel so small, and I have this awful thing in my stomach, all the time. Every time I look out past the guard wire that marks the perimeter, and there's dry, empty Kansas, it's like my stomach is trying to swallow me up. I *know* I'm going to get out of here in the spring, something will come up, it has to come up, I can't stand it here, I'll die, I'll really die out here.

People do die. Nobody from group thirty-six, but sometimes from other groups, like group six, the zombies. They put the body in a green bag in the morning and we see the guards throw them in a truck while we're standing in line for breakfast, and I realize they've been doing that since it started to get cold. I've been watching them but it's like I didn't really notice.

I start thinking about running out, just running, just trying it. Maybe the perimeter isn't on all the time. We don't go near it. Maybe they leave it off. And if they don't, I'd never know, just zap and then the guards leave you there and Paul thought that you didn't feel anything and he ought to know, since he's been zapped.

Crazy thoughts, that scare me, but it's so tempting. Like my mind doesn't really believe anything could happen to me.

In political instruction Natalie gives us all lapboards and paper and little short stubby pencils. Even Paul gets a lapboard. That's real different. Which makes me more nervous, I don't like different. Different is bad. My first thought is that we're going to have a test and I know there's no way I can pass, and I start wondering what they'll do to me if I flunk. Cut my rations? I'm trying, I'm trying as hard as I can. But that's what Nesly always says. So I clench my pencil and wait to see what she says.

Natalie says, "We need to see how you are progressing in your self-struggle. Please write about yourself. You can write anything you wish, but we will check to see what you have omitted. Everybody understand?"

No, I don't understand. I don't write very good. I mean, I didn't even finish high school. I don't know what they want. But nobody else says anything, so I'm not going to say anything. So I look down at the piece of paper. I look up and around the room and I see the twelve rules of self-struggle on the wall. All that stuff about one day at a time, and denial and all that stuff. A couple of people are writing but a lot of people are like me, just sitting there.

Paul is looking at me, and when I look at him, he shakes his head. No.

I frown. "No" what? But if I kept looking at him Natalie will notice and we'll both be in trouble.

So I look back at my paper. I try to write something.

> My name is Janee Scott. I am a theif and I asalted a person. I am . . .

I don't know how to spell maladjusted. So I change my sentence.

> . . . a criminol elamint.

That looks wrong, too. So I make the "i" an "e", "elament" looks better. So now what am I supposed to do? Natalie said that we would be checked for stuff we left out. So maybe I should tell about my arrest? So I write down about the woman I beat up and about stealing her purse.

I used to steal from the grocery, too. In the winter it was easy. I got picked up a couple of times and I spent a couple of nights in jail. So I better tell about that, too. I can't spell grocery so I write "store."

Finally I write;

> I am sory for my crimes, and for the bad things I did to sosiaty.

I haven't written very much, not even half the page. Some people are still writing. Some people have written most of a page already. I wonder what else I'm supposed to write. Natalie said we'd get in trouble if we left things out, but I don't know what kind of things.

What else could I say? Maybe I'm supposed to write about the things I did in camp? About the fight with the walking dead and about standing up in political instruction and saying that my problem was that I was in a labor camp?

Other people are asking Natalie questions, they kind of wait until she is looking around and then they half raise their hand and she comes over. So I wait and when she looks at me I put my hand up, feeling stupid. Natalie already knows I'm stupid, what difference does it make?

"Are we supposed to write about things we've done at camp?" I whisper.

"Whatever you want," Natalie says.

Somebody else raises their hand and she goes to them.

I don't know what to do. But she said that we'll get in trouble for the stuff we leave out. So I try to think of how to say what I've done at Protection.

> I have a bad atitude. I was in a fite with some pepoul from gr. 6 becase they tried to take my beans. Also, in our meeting, I say that my problim is I am at a laber camp, but my problim is that I am a theif and I asalted the person at the store and I stol food. When I stol food from the store, I hurt sosiaty.

I think the last sentence is pretty good, but when I think I've done something right in political instruction, I'm always wrong.

After the political instruction meeting, Sal starts ragging on Paul about his bunk, telling him he's going to throw him out. Sal has a bottom bunk, so he's really just leaning on Paul. I figure if Sal is going to take Paul's bunk, I'll take Sal's, so I grab my blanket and throw it there while Sal is facing down Paul.

Paul is going to come here first, thinking that Sal's bunk is empty. I'm going to tell him to try near the door. Actually, maybe I'll let him stay, maybe I won't, it depends. If he acts mealy-mouthed and just slinks down the door, he can freeze for all I care.

And he will, too, cause Paul's so tall that his blanket isn't long enough, and when he scrunches up it seems like his knees always stick out. And he's thin, the way some tall guys are, even thinner now. We're all even thinner now. He's going to end up all bones and joints, like his long fingers, stuck down there with Nesly. And Nesly'll latch on to him, and he won't have the sense to tell Nesly to get out of his face.

He'll feel sorry for Nesly. And he'll be nice to him, cause Paul's like that. He's decent. Even if it drives me nuts sometimes, like maybe that's why he doesn't want to know about me before I came here, like he'd prefer to think nice things about me or something. Or maybe that's not it at all, it's hard to know what he's thinking. He'd have to be pretty stupid to think nice things about me. But I do know, if someone doesn't take care of him, being decent will get him in deep.

And then all the sudden I'm thinking all these things at once, like what if Paul got like the zombies, what if he stopped caring, and I'm wondering if it could happen, although I can just see him, all raggedy-assed and blank-eyed, stick-like and smelling like piss, specially because he's thin to begin with. And at the same time, I keep thinking of Kansas out there, all pale colored, and us so little, and wondering if I might not end up a zombie, 'cause worrying about Paul, I never thought about people ending up zombies. I never thought about running for the perimeter. It's like my cousin said about her kid, when you have a baby, you don't have a chance to know how screwed up you are because you got to think about milk and diapers and all that shit, and the baby just keeps loving you.

So, not even meaning to, I pop out of Sal's bunk and just grab my blanket and go to see what's going on.

And what's going on is this: Paul has my stick, the one I got from the living dead, which I keep stuck in the frame under our bunk, and he doesn't really look like he's sure what to do with it. But Sal isn't sure how to get around him, because there isn't a lot of room between the bunks, you know. And Eddy, who has the bottom bunk across from ours, and Marisa, who has the bunk above Eddy's, are both swearing like mad, telling Sal to leave everything alone, 'cause if Paul starts swinging that stick in that little space people might get their heads knocked.

So I just walk up and say, "Sal, get back to your own bunk."

"Stay outta this," Sal says.

Paul doesn't say anything, so I just walk past Sal. The stupid dick elbows me and pushes me into the bunk, so I pop out again and grab the stick from Paul and stick it like a sword right into Sal's stomach and then start smacking him with it, bap, bap, bap, not really hurting him, but real fast, so he can't get a hold of it, and he puts up his hands trying to keep me off and keeps walking backward until he's clear of the bunks and I say, "Listen, mess with me again and I'll put it in your teeth."

That's the way you deal with trash.

So then I just walk back and sit down on the bunk and lean down and shove the stick back in the frame.

Paul stands there a moment and I look up at him and say, "What?"

He's got a kind of funny little smile on his face, but he just says, in that real reasonable way of his, "Are you back or do you just want the bunk?"

"It's warmer with someone else," I say. "And I've already got you broke in."

"Okay," he says. And sits down.

Eddy says, "Shit," and turns over with his back to us. Marisa is looking over the edge of her bunk. Marisa is with Kirk, I don't know where he's been all through this.

"Janee," Paul says, real quiet.

I look up at him, wondering, wondering what he's going to say, and feeling kind of funny, and maybe a little embarrassed, just because of the way he said my name.

"What did you write?" he says.

For a moment I don't follow, because it isn't what I expect at all. Then I figure out he means that stupid thing at political instruction, and without even thinking I kind of look over toward where the twelve rules are written on the wall, even though you can't see them from the bunk.

I'm irritated. Here I just saved his balls and he's going to play teacher games. "None of your business," I say.

"Janee—" he says, and takes my shoulder and kind of pushes my hair away from my face, nice, something he's never done before. Not like humping, but nice, like just for me, Janee. "It's important, what did you write?"

I shrug. "Just about being a thief and about fighting with the guys from group six and then about the time I said that my big problem was being in a labor camp."

He nods. "Good. When they give it back to you, just write the same thing, only in different words."

"Why are they going to give it back to me?"

"It's something they do," he says. He's real tense, real scared. I can't figure out what the big deal is. I know he's rattled from Sal, he doesn't know that the Sals of this world are really just looking for someone to tell them what they can and can't do.

"Hey," I say. "Don't worry about it. Come on, sit down here with me. It's cold enough in this barn." Saying that makes me smile. "My mother used to say that," I tell him. "She'd say, 'Close the door, it's cold enough in this barn.' "

He smiles a little. "Mothers say that sort of thing. Mine used to say, 'Close the door, you weren't raised in a barn.' "

"Must be a Pennsylvania thing," I say, even though I've heard it before, people in Cleveland say it.

"Yeah," he says, "must be a Harrisburg thing."

"You know," I say, real quiet, "you can be a real pain in the ass, but sometimes, you're all right."

"Janee," he says, "you've got to be real careful. I don't know why you adopted me, but you don't want me telling you things. You think you do, but I tell you about my life and then I'll be talking about things, things I think and believe, and you'll spend the rest of your life in a labor camp. You've got to just say back to them whatever they say to you, okay?"

He looks sad, he looks lonely. Well I'm lonely, too. All the time I'm lonely here. "Most of what they say is crap," I say, and I can feel myself getting irritated at him, getting irritated at all of it, I'm cold all the time, and hungry, damn it.

"I didn't say you had to believe it," he whispers.

Finally, they start the little electric heaters in the factory where we sew quilts, mostly because it's so cold that our fingers are stiff and our production is falling. It doesn't make the place warm, but I can't see my breath anymore.

I think about being warm all the time. I get these bruises on my legs, most of us do, from the cold. Chilblains. They hurt, real bad. Get up in the morning and it hurts to move my legs, and when I'm standing out there for roll call, the wind comes whipping over those little ripply Kansas hills and my legs hurt so much I have tears in my eyes. Then we cripple on over for breakfast and take it into the factory. Paul and I sit together against the wall, one blanket around our shoulders, the other across our legs, and eat.

I still haven't gotten to 180 quilts. I get 177 once and Corbin calls time to quit. I'm so mad I almost cry. Really, I never understood that saying, but I can feel the hot tears. I want to hit something. Nesly's doing real bad. He's coughing all the time, and spitting. He's on half rations, because his production is so low. I know when I'm losing my concentration because I can hear Nesly back there, coughing his lungs out.

I sew quilts. I can mostly sew without thinking, just zip, zip, zip, zip. I think about a lot of things. I think about what Paul said, about saying whatever they want me to say. And I think about what they want me to say. And I think about the question he asked me, when I said that it seemed to me that the Indians had it the best, that factory workers, and serfs and people like me, we all had it just about the same.

I keep trying to think about what would make it better. Everybody has to work, or people wouldn't have anything. Even Indians had to hunt or something. Like quilts, there's a lot in a quilt. There's the cottony stuff in the middle, somebody has to make that, and then somebody has to put it in the middle of the quilt. Somebody like us has to make the plain part, that they put the stuffing in. And somewhere, somebody has to put together all the little pieces of cloth and make the top part. Sometimes I imagine the way my plain shells will look when the top goes on them. I don't know if they'll be the kind with the patches, or if they'll be the ones with the stars, or the fans, or the pin wheels. . . . There's a lot of different patterns.

I'd like making quilts a lot better if I could do different things, like the top part, too. If I were going to make a new society, I'd have people do different things, not the same things all the time. So that somebody wouldn't always get stuck doing the stuff that no one likes to do.

At break one day, I tell Paul about my idea.

"That's a good idea," he says. "But who would make the schedule?"

I shrug. "Maybe everybody could talk about it. Like consensus." In political meetings we've been talking about consensus, having everybody come to agreement. It means that when you know you're outvoted, you give in, because you know you're not going to win. First you talk, and everybody kind of finds out what everybody else thinks, then when you vote, it's not really a vote, you consent. And if one persons says no, then you have to talk about it until everybody agrees. But you shouldn't say "no" unless you really have to. Everybody has to kind of trust everybody else, you have to decide, you may disagree, but do you disagree enough to stop everything?

"Quaker socialism," Paul says. For a moment I think he's laughing at me, but he's not. Things strike him funny that aren't funny to anyone else.

"What's that mean?" I ask.

"Quakers were a religious group that practiced some socialist techniques," he says.

"Religion is anti-socialist," I say, which everybody knows is true. Opiate of the masses and all that.

"A lot of Christian groups experimented with communal living," he says, "and some of the ways they found are very practical, like consensus. And socialism uses a lot of—" he stops.

"What," I say.

He shakes his head. "So you would use consensus to establish your schedule. I think that's a good idea. Have you figured out how to build your factories yet?"

He's changing the subject, because it's wrong to say that socialism is like religion. "No," I say. "I'm still working on it."

And then we have to go back to work. But the nice thing about going back to work after our two-thirty break is that it's only four more hours until dinner. And I'm thinking about what Paul said, about socialism being like religion. Which is very, very weird, because everybody knows that religion is all superstition.

But I don't say anything about religion to Paul. I just kind of store that away. And then I go back to thinking about my quilt factory.

Dinner is some sort of stew with floury dumplings, we don't always have beans. There's a bit of fatty meat in my bowl and I save it for last. Fat tastes so good to me. That sounds disgusting, but it does. I think I could eat straight fat. I'm hungry when I'm done, but I save my roll, because Paul and I always eat our bread right before we go to sleep. Some people save their cornbread from morning, they save it all day.

The next morning Corbin says that Nesly doesn't have to work.

Nesly says he'll work, it's okay, even though he's really sick and he's not even making eighty quilts a day. He's real thin, the bones in his chest are real sharp and his wrists look like sticks and his skin is real dry and scaly. His hair is coming out, too. Sometimes when I look over, he isn't even sewing, he's just got his head down on his table. Sometimes his eyes are closed, sometimes they're open.

We all know why he wants to go to work, if he doesn't go to work he'll be on infirmary rations.

Corbin says he should stay and rest and it's like Nesly just doesn't care. Like the walking dead.

Nesly is going to die.

When we're sewing, once in awhile I hear someone coughing—a lot of people cough—and then I think, "It's not Nesly. Nesly is going to die."

Nothing I can do.

In my society, Nesly wouldn't go on half rations, not if everybody felt Nesly was really trying. I think about what group thirty-six could do. If everybody gave Nesly a spoonful of their food, that would be thirty-one spoonfuls. That would be a lot, added to his half-ration, then he wouldn't starve. If everybody does it, that spreads it out, so nobody has to do a whole lot. Not that I think people really would, not for Nesly.

I don't tell anybody, though. They'd think I'd gone soft in the head.

Natalie hands out lapboards again, and the little stubby pencils. I've still got the pen stuck in the seam of my pants, it's been there since I stuck it in the seam of my pants when they told us we could only take what we were wearing. I never even think of it. Sometimes, Paul used to kind of play with it through my pants, but we don't do anything anymore but sleep. I look over at Paul, and he looks scared. Which makes me real nervous.

Natalie just hands back all those pieces of paper that we wrote before, and I look mine over. It really looks stupid.

Natalie says, "All of you left things out, things that we know about, so please explain further. Please tell us more about yourself and your self-struggle."

My self-struggle? I look up at the twelve rules. Look back down at my lapboard. It's real lousy plastic, bumpy with scrapes and scratches so that when I write my pencil will catch in the indentations. What do they know about that I didn't say? Juvenile reform?

> I was in jewvinile reform becase I stol a player and some chips. I had a chanse to reform at Brigum House but I did not. Sosiaty had to pay mony to fed me and give me cloths and when I got out of Brigum House I did the same bad things.

I know I'm doing good, now. At Brigham House they were always talking about our debt to society. And here they talk about that too. In a way we're like Nesly, we never make our quotas, so now society has to pay for us, like a spoonful from everybody.

> Now I am here . . .

I want to say in Protection, but I'm not sure how to spell it,

> . . . and Sosiaty gives me food and has to buld a camp so I have to work hard and make alot of quiwlts so I can give back to sosiaty. When I go home, I have to be a productiv memeber of sosiaty. Soshalisum means everbody together in sosiaty.

I underline the part about everybody together. I understand what Natalie had been trying to teach us, socialism means that everybody shares. The way to build the factory was to share, if everybody gave a little bit, like if we all gave a teaspoon of food to Nesly, nobody would notice the little bit. But put all the little bits together, and then you have a lot, and you can build a factory. I had figured it out, all by myself. I want to tell somebody, I want to tell Natalie, or Paul.

Paul is just sitting, looking at his lapboard. Natalie is answering someone's question. Natalie looks up at Paul, then walks over to him and says, "Aren't you going to add anything?"

Paul shrugs. "I added something."

Natalie walks up beside him, so she can read it. *"I have failed to renew* *my commitment to the revolution each day,"* she says, in a funny voice. "Is that all you can think to add, Paul?"

"That's all," he says.

Natalie flicks open her notebook. "What about Kevin Hanrahan?"

Paul says, like he doesn't care, "What about him, Natalie?"

"Why don't you write about him?"

He bends over his lapboard. We're all watching. Natalie always ignores Paul, she never says anything to him. Politicals aren't allowed to say anything in political meetings for the first two years.

She reads, *"Natalie has asked me to write about Kevin Hanrahan. Kevin Hanrahan was a student of mine six years ago. After he left my class I had no further communication with him."*

She shakes her head. Natalie looks mean. I think of when we first had political meetings, when she made Nancy stand up and say she was a prostitute. I wonder what Natalie did to get sent to a labor camp. I mean, Natalie always just seemed like a person who you felt sorry for, a chump, I was never afraid of her before.

"Paul," she says. "Wasn't there a letter?"

He doesn't say anything. Then he says, "I don't remember a letter."

"You're holding out," she says. "You realize, holding out on us will only hurt you, and hurt Kevin Hanrahan."

"Maybe when Degraff—" the camp guard I always called Helga "—used me as a demonstration model on the perimeter there was brain damage, Natalie." He says her name sarcastic, like he's being polite, and he's not.

"This isn't a camp for politicals," Natalie says. "This camp is easy. You don't want to end up somewhere like Rushville."

"Why don't you go help the kids with their compositions," he says, but this time he doesn't sound sarcastic at all, he just sounds like he doesn't care.

But he does, because when we climb into our bunk, he's shaking all over, all tense and scared. And I don't know what to do, so I don't do anything. And after awhile he goes to sleep.

A couple of days later they take Nesly to the infirmary. He can't walk anymore, and he mutters all the time, talking, talking, but he doesn't know what he's saying and nobody can understand him.

"We could have done something," I tell Paul.

He shakes his head. "There's nothing you could do, Janee."

"No," I say, irritated, "not me. Us. All of us, group thirty-six." So I explain to him about if everybody gave him a spoonful. "That's socialism," I say, "that's how you build the factory."

He nods. "So who owns the factory?"

Owns the factory? "The people who work in it, I guess." I think a moment. "No, everybody, because everybody put a spoonful in. It's everybody's factory."

He grins, "That's right, that's it, Janee. That's socialism."

"Yeah," I say. "And the people who work there decide the way to do the job, and they use consensus to make the schedule, and everybody takes turns, I mean, except for the jobs that someone can't do, like you know, if they have to fix a sewing machine, I can't do that, but all the rest of the jobs, people all trade around, so nobody has to do the boring stuff all the time."

"And there are no bosses," he says.

"But it doesn't work that way," I say. At least, I never heard of it working that way, I mean, we're supposed to be socialist, even in *Cleveland,* and Cleveland sure isn't like that.

"No," he says, "it doesn't."

"Why not?"

He shrugs, looks at the floor. "I don't know," he says.

But I don't believe him, he could answer me. He could tell me why it's not working. It's one of the things he won't talk about, like that stuff about religion.

We're sitting in the factory, eating our breakfast. Corbin comes in. "Corbin's not a prisoner," Paul says.

Which is stupid. "What, you think he's a guard in disguise?" I say.

"No, Corbin was in on a ten year sentence. Chick, over in group thirty-one, told me."

That doesn't make any sense. Why the hell would someone stay here after he's served his time unless he's soft upstairs? Corbin even told us that he's served time in seven different work camps, some as far west as Colorado, out where there's no water. Corbin is a little weird, in the summer he doesn't wear shoes so he can save the people the cost of shoe leather. Corbin is a first-class chump.

Corbin makes us all go to our sewing machines and then he tells us that the camp director has asked us all to show some unity, to show some spirit. "Today is our chance to show the rest of the camp that group thirty-six is not slacking," Corbin says. It's some sort of production push. "If you normally make 120 quilts, try to make 160. If you make 160, try to make 200."

Then the big news. "You'll get extra beans at 2:30, because of your extra effort," Corbin says. "But think, if you earn those extra beans, maybe this will happen more often."

Hell, for extra beans, I'd make 500 quilts.

In the first hour I make nineteen, which is great, but my shoulders are killing me because I'm working the foot of the threader right at my fingers and pushing the cloth through as hard as I can and I'm afraid I'm going to get my fingers under the needle.

The second hour I make twenty, which is the most I ever made in an hour. I can feel myself sweating. I mean, it's cold in that stupid factory but I'm sweating, I'm concentrating so hard. And the third hour I mess up two in a row, and I only make sixteen. I tell myself I can still make 180. Chris makes 180 all the time, and he's just some stupid dickhead from Detroit. When we break at 2:30 I've made 114 quilts, which is a personal best. Paul has made 106, which is good for him. Corbin makes us count, then we go for beans.

Beans at 2:30, it's wonderful. I can't believe we get to eat again at 7:30. "We get beans at dinner, right?" I ask Corbin.

"Yeah," he says, "you do." But he's talking to some other group leaders.

As soon as we eat the beans, Corbin hurries us back to our factory building. "Group fourteen is making an average of seventeen an hour," he says. Then he makes us tell our figures out loud. Chris has made 127 quilts. Thirteen more than me. Two more an hour than me. But I'm okay, not the fastest, but not the slowest, either. I'm up in the top five. The slowest is Roy, who has only made 91.

Everybody gets real quiet when Roy tells how many he's made, everybody is thinking that he'll pull our group average down.

"We'll stop for dinner, but then we'll work late, so everybody has a chance to meet their quota."

We go back to work. Usually the four hours between 2:30 and dinner just drag by, but today they go fast. At dinner Corbin has us figure again. I've made 185 quilts, the most I've ever made. A lot of people have made more than they ever made before.

Marisa says, "Maybe we should just take ten minutes for dinner and then come back, so we have more time until lights out at ten."

Corbin nods, and says we have to decide. So we vote, and decide we will, although some people don't want to. I think about consensus. But first of all, if we wait until we have consensus it will take too much time. Second of all, a lot of people in the group don't understand about consensus, they're selfish.

Anyway, we gobble our food—normally I never eat fast, normally I eat real slow, trying to make it last—and hurry back. Other groups are doing the same thing. It's weird to be back in the factory with the clamp lamps on, and my table isn't in good light, so I can't see very well, so I have to go slower. I'm real tired. I'm so tired I can't see good. I can't focus.

I get tired more easily. And if I try to comb my hair with my fingers, some of it comes out. I can't concentrate on sewing, I keep thinking about Cleveland, about riding the bus down I-90 past Martin Luther King Boulevard, and how right before Dead Man's Curve you can see the lake, and the rocks. Sometimes the lake's real clear, and sometimes, if there's been a storm or something, the water's real brown.

So I start to cry a little, which is stupid. I hated the bus. I only took the bus when the rapid broke down—which it did fairly often. And then I had to stand because all the people who took the rapid were on the bus.

Finally we stop, and I've only made 39 quilts. That's 224. I don't even remember falling into the bunk.

The next morning some of us even get extra cornbread, because we went over 180 quilts, and after work we get extra beans, although my production is way down after the day before. I'm still tired from the push.

And we have political instruction. I figure I'm just going to do nothing during political instruction, maybe I'll sit in the back and go to sleep.

But Natalie sees me in the back. "Janee," she says, first thing, "what have you learned from all this?"

The questions are all trick questions and I always get them wrong anyway. "That we work better for rewards," I say. Natalie gets this little smile she has when she's going to roast somebody's ideology, "and that shows we need to analyze our own motives better," I say, quick, because that's always good. I'm just beginning to figure out what we're supposed to be analyzing for.

And all the sudden it's like I know the right answer. Capitalism is selfish, our problem is that we are still selfish. What has to happen is that we have to be less selfish, otherwise socialism will never work. "If we were truly socialist," I say, "we would work for the good of everybody, that's society, but we still have old-fashioned, uh, capitalist ways of thinking and we work for rewards."

Natalie looks surprised, then she looks at Paul—who is staring at his long spider fingers and doesn't look at me even though you think he'd be happy that I finally gave them back an answer they wanted. She thinks he told me what to say.

"I've been thinking about it a lot," I say. "I think that socialism is a really good idea, you know, everybody sharing, and everybody being equal and everything, but what I want to know is, why isn't it like that on the outside?"

Natalie frowns. I've made a mistake.

"What I mean is, socialism says that, say, if we had a real quilt factory, everybody would own it, right? And the people that made the quilts, they'd like, trade jobs, so that sometimes you have to do the boring stuff, but sometimes you get to do the more interesting stuff, like putting the piece work, the stars and stuff, on the top. And that everybody would vote, like we did last night about coming back from dinner to work on our quota. But outside, things don't work like that, there are bosses and people don't trade. In a way," I say, "we're more socialist than they are outside."

Natalie looks really surprised. "Well, Janee," she says, "the difference is that inside, we really analyze ourselves, and we really work together."

"So maybe everybody ought to have to do what we do," I say, "but that makes it sound like everybody ought to come to a labor camp, which isn't what I mean. But if I hadn't come here, I'd have never figured this out."

Natalie writes awhile in her notebook and I figure I'm roasted. Then she looks up and says, "Janee, when you first came here you had a very negative, a very ego-centered attitude. I want you to know I'm astonished and impressed at the progress you've made." And then she smiles at me.

Some people are nodding to themselves. Some are like Paul, staring at their hands. Roy is looking at me, naked hate on his face.

In bed, after lights out, Paul says to me, "Why did you say that?"

"Because I figured it out, from what you told me."

I think he'll at least say something nice, but he just sighs.

"I figured it out, myself," I say.

"I know you did," he says.

"You told me to tell them what they wanted," I say. Even though I didn't just say it because it's what they want me to say.

He doesn't answer me. Sometimes I don't understand him at all.

The next evening, at dinner, I get two extra chunks of cornbread. I must looked surprised because Ears, one of the cooks, says, "Camp Director's orders, Janee."

After dinner Natalie says, "I made a report on your progress in self-analysis and self-education."

For a moment I think, I owe her. Then I think, she looks good for having someone make progress, so maybe we're even. I try to give Paul a chunk of cornbread.

"You earned it," he says.

"You act like I did something bad," I say. "You told me to tell them what they want. You told me to think about it. Things *would* be better if everybody was socialist, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah," he says, just agreeing with me.

"You don't believe in socialism."

"Janee," he says, then stops. "Janee, you don't ever talk about escaping anymore."

"I am," I say. "I'm still thinking about it. But I can't do anything about it until spring." I sound kind of whiny, even to me. "You never talk to me," I say. "You think I'm stupid. I figured that stuff out myself, nobody *told* me."

"I don't think you're stupid," he says.

"Bullshit," I say. "Look at you, Mr. Schoolteacher. You still think you're special, an *intellectual*. Well, if it wasn't for me, people like Sal would have you for lunch. And I can figure things out, too. And I can figure out that you gotta be here for a reason and you didn't off no street-jock with the lid off a trash barrel. But you don't want to talk about it. Why don't you ever talk about it, huh? What are you afraid of? 'Cept you think none of us dumbshits can understand."

All the time he's shaking his head, standing there shaking his head, no, no, no, no. "I wrote a couple of articles on socialist trends in America before the revolution," he says, "about attempts to establish Christian utopias along socialist lines. I didn't toe the party line."

"Yeah? How come when I say something like I did at the political instruction last night you act like you're all disappointed in me?"

"I'm not disappointed in you," he says.

"Bullshit, jack-jockey. I been in your bunk for a couple of months, I know you pretty well, even if I don't use twenty dollar words to say what I'm thinking."

"I don't care about your vocabulary," he says. "Janee, Janee. You're tough and you're smart. I'm glad you're figuring out what they want. But when you say that the labor camp helped make you a better citizen I'm not going to like it."

"I didn't say that," I say. He twists things. He twists them around. Listen to television, that's what political people do.

"In political instruction," he said. "What do you think you got brownie points with the Camp Director for if not your impassioned defense of re-education?"

"That's not true!" I say. "That's not true! I said I didn't want everybody to go to labor camps!"

"But if you never went to a labor camp, you never would have learned about socialism!" he says.

"So? So I might have said that. So it's true. Maybe I had to come to a place like this, where I *had* to learn about it, or I never would have paid any attention."

"And what, all of society has to go through re-education?" he says. "That's what I was studying, in the nineteenth century, people used to try to establish socialist communities, they were all people willing to give up everything. And not one of those communities worked. Not *one*. They all died out after a few years, the Oneida Colony, the Shakers, all of them."

"So you don't believe," I say. Which scares me, I don't know why, but it scares me. Because what if he's right, what if it's all wrong?

He shakes his head. "I don't believe in re-education. I don't know, I don't know what I believe. But I know one thing, I mean, look at you, practical, tough little Janee who saw this goddamn system for what it is, slave labor! And now you're talking about re-educating all of society!"

"I don't even understand what you're talking about. You said that we were evolving," I say. "First the Indians, then feudalism, then capitalism, now socialism. We still have all of these capitalist ideas in our heads, how are we going to get rid of them?"

And all of the sudden I start crying. I never cry. I mean, I feel like crying sometimes at the camp, but I never cry. And I don't even know why I'm crying except I am. I want socialism, I want things to be better. I want to go home. Paul hugs me.

"I'm so scared," I tell him. "I'm so scared we're all going to die, like Nesly."

In political instruction Natalie has lapboards again but only certain people have to write, all the rest of us can do whatever we want. Paul is one of the people who has to write. I lie in the bunk, wrapped up in both blankets and doze, waiting.

Lately, when I'm half asleep, I sort of dream. It happens when I'm sewing, it happens at break sometimes. I'm not really sound asleep, just barely into sleep. Nothing ever happens, sometimes I dream I'm at work. I always dream about things that are at the camp, and usually I'm just doing something real. This time I dream about morning, when it's blue. While we are getting our breakfast, when the sun is just coming up and some of the sky is black and still night off in the west, Kansas turns blue, like water, like air.

It's real beautiful when that happens. I never knew places could be blue. The lake could be blue, the sky could be blue, but I never knew hills could be blue. Blue isn't a solid color, it's an air color, a water color. If something as big as Kansas can turn blue, I feel like I can disappear. Nothing happens while I am dreaming, Kansas is just blue and I feel like I could disappear.

I wake up scared.

So I get up, wrapped in both blankets, and sit on the concrete at the foot of the bunk beds where I can see the end of the barracks where the political instruction is going on. I can see Paul, he's not writing, and I can see Natalie when she walks in the part of the room where the bunks aren't blocking my view.

Finally she stops in front of Paul and she says, "Is that all?"

He doesn't say anything.

"You're resisting."

"You want me to accuse people," he says.

She shakes her head, "No, we don't need you to accuse people, we already know. We are trying to help you." And when he doesn't say anything she says, "You're only one person. You're full of egotism. You're saying everyone else is wrong and you're right."

He is only one person. Natalie and Corbin and a lot of people believe in socialism, why should Paul be right and everybody else wrong?

Eventually Paul comes back and lies down, all tense and shaky.

He's cold when I curl up against him, but we get our blankets all in the right place and I go right back to sleep, like falling down, like slipping under water, and Kansas is blue. Soft, without having real edges, blue. I don't dream about anybody else, and nothing happens, just Kansas, rolling away toward the sunrise, blue.

In the morning when we get our breakfast, Kansas is blue.

When we take our break, I sit down where I can lean against the wall, and when I close my eyes, Kansas is blue.

So I work, and I eat, and I conduct self-analysis. Now in political instruction we are testifying. That means that people get up, and they say their name and what they did wrong, like when I testify I will say, "I am Janee Scott, and I am a thief and a criminal." And then we have to tell about our life.

It's not like it was when we stood up at the first instruction and said that, now only people who want to stand up and testify. Sometimes someone will stand up to testify and Natalie will say, "No, you're not ready."

I figure I'm not ready. But one day Natalie says to me, "Janee, why don't you tell us your story." She says it in the nice way she sometimes talks to me now, real gentle. So I stand up and I say, "I am Janee Scott and I am a thief and a criminal. I was born in Lorraine, Ohio, but my mother moved to Cleveland when I was real little."

I tell my whole life, just standing there talking. My voice just goes on and on. And I tell about the things I did, and how unhappy I was sometimes, and how I hated people who were just normal, and I start to cry. Like I never realized how much I wanted to be like the people on television. I tell about the woman I assaulted, and how I never thought about how'd she feel, and I keep crying. It's awful, but it feels good. And the group understands, nobody says anything, everybody just listens, we are all together.

And when I'm all done, I'm so tired, but I feel so light and empty. I feel pure. Paul is watching me, and I think he'll never understand this feeling.

That night, when I sleep, I don't dream about Kansas being blue.

Summer in Kansas is almost as bad as winter, it's so hot in the factory buildings that people faint. But when we wake up it's already getting light, and I never feel like I'm going to drown in the blue while we're getting breakfast.

It's been hot for awhile, it's maybe July, and Natalie says one morning, "Paul, get your things together and don't go over to the factory building today."

I know what it is, he's being transferred. I grab hold of both Paul's hands.

"They're transferring politicals," Natalie says.

Paul nods. He looks thin and sad. His hair is long and he looks scraggly.

"Natalie," I say, "I'd like to give Paul a haircut so that group thirty-six will make a good impression when he is transferred."

She knows I just want to say good-bye, but she nods. So Corbin lets me have a pair of scissors and I try to cut his hair.

We don't say very much. I'm not a good barber, but he looks better when I'm finished. I even trim his beard. I don't know what to say. I keep thinking of political instruction, sometimes I think he's looking at me, that way he does, like he's disappointed, but most of the time when I look at him, he is looking at his hands and he just looks sad.

I carry his blanket roll out for him, even though he could carry it himself. There are some other people waiting, other politicals from other groups, all standing by themselves. He touches my shoulder and then my face with his long spider fingers.

"Be careful, okay?" I say.

"You pick better next time," he says, "okay? No politicals."

"You find someone to look out for you," I say.

Then I have to go back to the factory. In a funny way, I'm relieved. No one is watching me anymore.

But that night, I have a hard time falling asleep by myself. And when I do, I dream of blue Kansas, and Paul's in my dream. Just one person, way out in the blue, hard to see.

But I know it's Paul, who else would it be?●

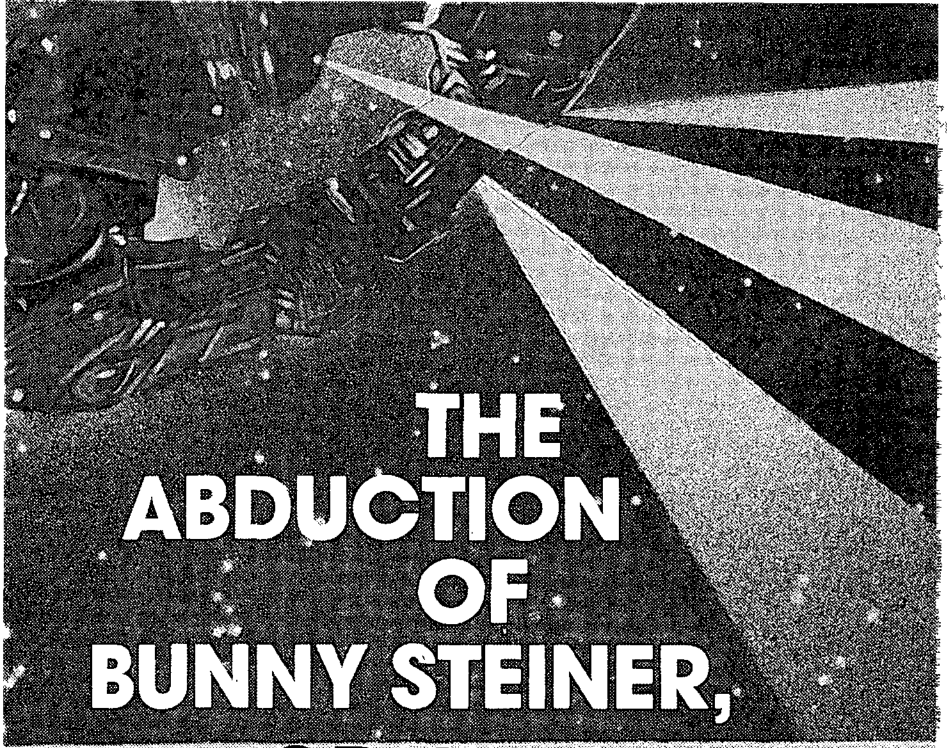
THE PIPE

Like Huck Finn, at that age,
I made a pipe, drilled
the yellow bamboo bowl
for the stem socket, the stem
a stalk of dried oleander bored
with a hot wire and still nubbed
with the sockets of leaves.

When I light up, my tongue burns
with the tang of *sidr*-apple leaves
from my yard in Dhahran, and herbs
swiped from my mother's cupboard,
and my finger brailles down the stem
over the symmetrical sockets, notched
like years on a calendar, measured
steps into the past which I tell
over like the strung "worry-beads"
with which Arabs recall
the ninety-nine names of God
the Incomprehensible,
and the smoke roils up
mimicking the immense torches
of gas flares, orange and black
with half-burned organics,
which obscured the cold, hard ache
of stars over the empty desert.

If I must burn, as I must,
as everything that shares carbon
must in the oxidations
we call life, let me not
be told over incompletely,
let me burn like a star
whose core collapses
into pure light.

—David Lunde



THE ABDUCTION OF BUNNY STEINER, OR A SHAMELESS LIE

by Thomas M. Disch

We are proud to be publishing a short story by Thomas M. Disch—one of science fiction's most respected and multitalented authors. Mr. Disch has been theater critic for the *Nation* for the past several years, and his own plays include the controversial "The Cardinal Detoxes." The author's latest novel, *The M.D.: A Horror Story*, will shortly appear in paperback from Berkley Books, and his seventh collection of poems, *Dark Verses and Light*, is just out from Johns Hopkins University Press. Mr. Disch is an expert on U.F.O.s. His work on the subject has also appeared in the *Nation*, and provided inspiration for the following story.

art: Laura Lakey

Rudy should produce a UFO book after the manner of Whitley Strieber's *Communion, a True Story,* Rudy thought Bitzberg was putting him on. It was April 1, but Rudy's situation was too desperate for April Fool's Day jokes. Bitzberg knew how desperate Rudy was at the present moment, the latest, lowest nadir of a career rich in nadirs. He was: (a) in debt well over his head; (b) apartmentless; (c) obese; (d) an apostate member of A.A.; (e) in his third month of writer's block; and, the crown jewel among Rudy's woes, (f) all the royalties for his best-selling fantasy series, *The Elfin Horde*, et al., were being held in perpetual escrow pending the settlement of a lawsuit that had been brought against him and his subsequently bankrupted publisher, Djinn Books. The lawsuit had been initiated by a Baltimore attorney and professional litigant, Rafe Boone, who specialized in charging best-selling authors with plagiarism and settling with them out of court. Rudy had balked at shelling out $100,000.00 to Boone, a jury had decided in Boone's favor, and then an appeals court had reversed the verdict. While Boone was contesting that appeal, he had been shot dead on the steps of the courthouse by another of his victims. Shortly afterward, the legal remains of Djinn Books had been swallowed up by a German publishing consortium. Boone having died intestate, his estate was now being contested by five separate claimants, and the bulk of that estate consisted of their potential seizure of Rudy's royalties. It was the opinion of Rudy's attorney, Merrill Yates, that Rudy had as much chance of finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow as of seeing any further proceeds from *The Elfin Horde* and its six sequels. Worse, he'd been enjoined from writing new books in the series and even from using the pseudonym of Priscilla Wisdom. The experience had been embittering.

"A UFO story?" Rudy had marveled. "You've got to be kidding. Besides the Streiber book, Random House is bringing out one just like it by that other jerk."

But Bitzberg was not a kidder. "So? That means it's a trend. All you need is a slightly different angle. Strieber's angle is he's the first name writer who's been inside a UFO. Hopkins has got this whole club of UFO witnesses, which anyone can join: that's his angle, democracy. The whole thing could become a religion. Anyhow that's what Janet Cruse thinks. It was her idea. And she thinks you're the person to write the next book."

"Janet Cruse? You've got to be kidding!"

Bitzberg shook his head and smiled a snaggletoothed smile that had been known to frighten small children. "She's with Knopf now, and she wants *you* to write a UFO book."

"Janet Cruse is with Knopf? I can't believe it."

Years ago, when Janet, a Canadian living in London, had been handling Rudy's English rights, she had sold several of his Priscilla Wisdom titles in foreign markets without telling him. By the time he'd discovered what she'd done, Janet had absconded to Toronto. She'd sold three books in Belgium, two in Portugal, four in Israel, and those were just the sales Rudy had found out about. He'd never seen a cent of the money.

"She realizes you've got reason to be angry with her. But she hoped this might make it up to you."

"If she wants to make it up to me, she could just pay me the money she stole."

"She doesn't have it. Believe me, I've seen where she's living. She's no better off than you."

"And she's at *Knopf*? And Knopf wants a UFO book?"

"Knopf brought her in, because she's considered an expert on occult writers. UFOs are as respectable as astrology these days. Random House, Atlantic Monthly Press—those are not your typical exploitation publishers. Anyhow, do you want to have lunch with her or not?"

"What kind of money are we talking about?"

"Fifty thousand. Half with the portion and outline, half on publication."

"Fifty thousand? Strieber got a *million*."

"So? Maybe he's got a better agent. Or maybe he's got a bigger name. Or maybe it was because he was there first."

Rudy sighed. He had no choice, and Bitzberg knew it. "Set up a lunch."

Bitzberg exposed his terrible teeth. "It's already set up. Tomorrow, one o'clock, Moratuwa Wok."

"And *morituri te salutamus* to you too, old buddy."

Bitzberg lit a cigarette. His fingers trembled, making the flame of the match quaver. His fingers had trembled as long as Rudy had known him. It was some kind of nervous affliction. "I do what I can, Rudy, I do what I can."

"So this is my idea," Janet Cruse explained the next day, sipping lukewarm tea from a dainty cracked teacup. "Strieber's book shows that the audience is there, and Hopkins's book shows that anyone can tell essentially the same story that Strieber did and the similarity only goes to *prove* that something strange has to be happening, or how is it that *everyone* is telling the same story?"

"How indeed," Rudy agreed.

"Now the one thing you *have* to promise, Rudy, is that you never joke about this. Flying saucers are like religion. You've got to be solemn. Have you read Strieber's book?"

He nodded.

"Then you know the basic line to take. You're upset, you're confused, you're skeptical, you can hardly believe what's happened to you. And you're terribly grateful to Strieber and Hopkins for having had the courage to tell their stories, because now at last you can tell the world about you—and Bunny."

"Bunny?"

Janet dabbed at the crisp, crimson corners of her lips with a paper napkin. "Bunny is your daughter." She tilted her head coquettishly and waited for him to express some suitable astonishment.

He maintained a poker face, however, and their waitress chose just that moment to arrive with their bowls of millet, steamed vegetables, and a condiment made of onion and raisins. Moratuwa Wok was a Sri Lankan vegetarian restaurant, and it did not have a liquor license. There were gaudy posters of Hindu gods on the wall, and scented candles burning on each of the six tables. Janet and Rudy were the only people having lunch.

"How old is my daughter Bunny?" he asked, after the waitress had gone away.

"Oh, I'd say five or six. Four would be ideal, it's when kids are cutest, but you've got to consider that a lot of the text will be Bunny's account while she's under hypnosis."

"Mm-hm."

He considered Janet's proposition while she nibbled a stalk of asparagus still so crisp it barely drooped as she lifted it to her lips. Sri Lankans did not overcook their vegetables.

"You see how inevitable it is, don't you?" Janet said, halfway down the stalk. "Strieber *played* with the possibility. His little boy was allowed to hear the reindeer on the roof, so to speak, and who knows but that in his next book he'll go all the way and have the dear boy abducted. And *missing* for a few days. Imagine the anguish a parent must suffer. Especially a *father*. How long was Cosby's *Fatherhood* at the top of the list? And how many copies did it sell? It set a record, I think, and it's still going strong. And what could be a greater torment for a loving father than to have his daughter abducted by aliens, who perform unspeakable acts on her? Which is what mainly goes on, as I understood it, in all those unidentified flying objects. So there you've got another hot issue for a cherry on the sundae: child abuse. Can you imagine any paperback house turning down a package like that?"

"It sounds like a very marketable commodity, Janet, I agree. There's only one problem."

"What's that? Tell me, I'll solve it." She snapped decisively at a carrot stick. "You don't have a daughter, is that it? *That* is why you are the ideal dad for little Bunny. Because *obviously* we can't rely on a kid that young to go on talk show circuits and be cross-examined. So what *you* say is that Bunny has been so traumatized by her abduction that she can't possibly be exposed to the brutalizing attentions of the press. She has to be protected from all that, which is why there are no photographs in the book. And as for the fact that Bunny doesn't exist, that's what makes it perfect. That way even Woodward and Bernstein themselves couldn't find her."

Rudy shook his head. "No one will buy it."

"Believe me, they'll buy a million copies."

"Anyone who knows me knows I don't have a daughter."

"But who knows you, Rudy? No one, a dozen people. You don't have a job to go to every day. You've been in and out of A.A. You're broke. Obviously you haven't been the best father in the world to Bunny, but that's part of your anguish. She's being raised by her mother, somewhere upstate, and you visit them whenever you can."

"And what's her name, Bunny's mother?"

"Kimberly, Jennifer, Melissa, take your pick. You can spend a couple chapters filling in the background on the guilt you feel for having let her bear all the responsibility for Bunny's upbringing. You've offered to marry her, because she's a beautiful, talented woman, but she's refused to consider it until you've proved you can stay sober one full year. And of course you can't, but you still visit them whenever you can. They live in this *chalet* in the Catskills. Melissa handles real estate. Or does she paint? No, real estate, that's a daydream anyone can handle. So that's Bunny's background. The story proper can begin in June."

"This coming June?"

"Mm-hm, when you've agreed to go and look after Bunny, while Melissa takes a well-deserved vacation. You can guess what happens then."

"She's abducted by the aliens."

"Right. For *five days* she's missing, and you are frantic, but even so an obscure impulse keeps you from notifying the police. You search the woods. You see the clearing where the UFO must have landed. You find Bunny's doll there in the matted-down grass. No, better than that: her dog, her faithful dog who followed her everywhere."

"Wouldn't it be better if the dog were abducted with her?"

"Of course! What am I telling you all this for, anyhow? *You're* the writer."

"Do you really think I've sunk so low that I'd write the book you're talking about?"

"Oh, I think you'd always have *written* it, Rudy. The only difference now is that you'll sign your name to it."

"You think I'm shameless."

She nodded.

She was right.

* * *

Five weeks later he'd finished a first draft of 340 pages. *The Visitation* was shorter than either Strieber's book or Hopkins's, but it was intense. If Knopf insisted, he could pad out the middle chapters with more paternal anguish and add any number of pages to the transcript of Bunny's testimony under hypnosis. After the nature descriptions—an idyllic walk with Bunny through blossoming mountain laurels and the thunderstorm on the night she disappears—that transcript was the best thing in the book. The Xlom themselves (such was the name he'd given the aliens that both Strieber and Hopkins had left nameless) were no more incredible than darling four-year-old bright-as-a-button Bunny. "Honey Bunny" he called her in moments of supreme paternal doting, or "Funny Bunny" when she was being mischievous, and sometimes (but never in the book, only when he'd finished his day's quota of ten pages), with a fond, bourbon-scented smile, "Money Bunny." Margaret O'Brien had never been more endearing, and Shirley Temple was crass by comparison. Bunny was sugar and spice and everything nice.

And the Xlom were unspeakable. Strieber and Hopkins had both been very equivocal about their aliens. Strieber even allowed as how they might not come from Outer Space but maybe from some Other Dimension or else perhaps they were gods. *Quien sabe?* Half Strieber's book was devoted to such bootless speculations. Hopkins was less accommodating. His aliens seemed to be conducting genetic experiments on their captive humans, impregnating the women with genetically altered sperm stolen from the men and then, when the unwilling brides were a couple months pregnant, abducting them again and stealing their fetuses. Hopkins supplied no explanation as to why his aliens did this, but it certainly was not an activity that inspired trust.

Rudy himself went easy on the enforced pregnancy fantasy (Bunny, after all, was only four), but he bore down hard on the details of the little darling's physical examinations and on the mysterious scar tissue that came to be discovered all over her body. Hopkins had also done a lot with scars, including some blurry photos of what looked like knees with squeezed pimples. Sometimes Rudy felt a tad uneasy about the transparency of *The Visitation*'s S & M sub-text, but Janet had told him not to worry on that score. The target audience for UFO books could read the entire works of the Marquis de Sade, she insisted, and if the Sadean cruelties were ascribed to aliens, they would remain completely innocent as to what it was they were getting off on. Such had been the wisdom of Priscilla Wisdom in her time, as well, so Rudy didn't have any problem letting it all hang out. He wrote at a pace he hadn't managed for the past five years and enjoyed doing it. It might not be art, but it was definitely a professional job.

Two weeks after he'd turned in the manuscript to Bitzberg and had been duly patted on the back for his speedy performance, Rudy still had not heard from Janet, nor (which was more worrisome) had he got back the executed contracts from Knopf. Feeling antsy, he called the Knopf office and asked to speak to Ms. Cruse.

"Who?" the receptionist asked.

"Janet Cruse," he insisted. "She's my editor there."

The receptionist insisted that there was no editor with Knopf called Janet Cruse, nor any record of there ever having been one.

He realized right away that he'd been conned. The walk back to the Knopf office after the lunch at Moratuwa Wok, the good-bye at the elevators, the freebie copy of the Updike book (*Trust Me*, indeed!), the boilerplate contracts with the Knopf logo (something that any agent would have had many opportunities to acquire, alter, and duplicate), and then the constant barrage of phone calls "just to kibbitz," but really to keep him from ever needing to call her at the Knopf office.

But what about Bitzberg: hadn't *he* ever tried to call her at Knopf? Or talked to someone else there about *The Visitation*? On the other hand, if Bitzberg knew Janet wasn't at Knopf, if he'd been in collusion with her from the start, why would he have advanced Rudy $10,000 from his own pocket to tide him over until the nonexistent Knopf advance came in?

"I didn't," Bitzberg explained, "know that, at first. And when I came to suspect it, I admit that I didn't at once tell you. At that point the book was half done, and I'd received money. Not from Knopf, admittedly, but the check didn't bounce for all that. If you want to bow out now, I expect we could take the money and run. On the other hand, there is a bonafide contract for *sixty* thou, and they're not asking for any revisions. They love the book, as is."

"They?"

"The People."

"Who are the people?"

"A cult, I gather. I asked Janet, and she was not particularly forthcoming. But they have their own imprint, Orange Bangle Press." Bitzberg raised a cigarette in his trembling fingers: "I know what you're going to say. You're going to be sarcastic about the name of the press. *But* they have had a major best-seller, *I Wish I May*."

"I've never heard of it."

"Well, maybe 'major' is an exaggeration. It sold almost forty thousand copies in a trade paperback over the last two years. And they expect to do a lot more with your book."

"You've got a contract?"

Bitzberg smiled, he nodded, he cringed. "I'll show you," he said.

Rudy read the contract.

He signed it.

Only then did he go to the library and find out what there was to be known about The People.

The People had begun, humbly enough, in 1975 as a support group in San Diego for smokers trying to kick the habit by means of meditation and herbal medicine. This original narrow focus gradually came to include other areas of concern, from the therapeutic use of precious stones in the cure of breast cancer and diabetes to the need for a stronger defense posture. One of the group's founding members and the author most often published by Orange Bangle Press was Ms. Lillian Devore, the sole heir of Robert P. Devore of the munitions firm Devore International, contractors for the Navy's Atreus missile. Most of the information in the library about The People focused on the recent legal proceedings concerning the mental competence of Ms. Devore, and her subsequent demise only two months ago just after a court had found that she was not provably insane, notwithstanding certain passages in her published works and the opinions of psychiatrists hired by her niece and nephew, who had brought the case against her.

Needless to say, that niece and nephew had inherited nothing from Ms. Devore's estate, all of which was bequeathed to The People with the sole proviso that the organization continue to advance the study of herbal medicine and to investigate UFO phenomena. UFOs had become a matter of concern only late in Ms. Devore's life, after she had entertained the hypothesis at her trial that her niece and nephew might conceivably have been the issue of secret genetic experiments being conducted by aliens on the women of Earth (and on her half-sister Sue-Beth Smith in particular). This was essentially the same hypothesis being advanced by Budd Hopkins in *Intruders*, and Ms. Devore's defense attorney was able to introduce as evidence both Hopkins's book and an open letter by the head of Random House, Howard Kaminsky, stating that the publisher and his associates were persuaded of the book's veracity, intellectual integrity, and great importance. It followed from this, Ms. Devore's attorney had argued, that his client must be considered at least as sane as Howard Kaminsky, and the jury had agreed. Two weeks later, at the ripe old age of ninety-four, this monument to the efficacy of herbal medicine died in her sleep, and the last to be heard of The People in the news concerned the unsuccessful efforts of one of The People to have Ms. Devore's estate divided equally among the 150 members of the sect. That effort was quickly quashed, and the direction of the organization and the control of its funds was to remain under the direction of Ms. Devore's former financial adviser and dear friend, B. Franklin Grace, the man who had figured so prominently during the competency hearings for his role in protecting Ms. Devore from the attention of the press. It was Grace, as the head of Orange Bangle Press, who had signed the contract for *The Visitation*.

Books In Print listed four titles by Lillian Devore, including her reputed best-seller *I Wish I May*, but none were available either from the library or at any bookstore where Rudy asked for them. So that was the end of his research efforts. Anyhow, it seemed pretty clear what had happened. Janet had contacted B. Franklin Grace and pitched her idea for the *Communion* rip-off to him, got a go-ahead, and then scouted for someone desperate enough to write it. Why she'd felt she had to diddle Rudy into thinking he was doing the book for Knopf was still a puzzle. Either she thought he needed the extra bait of Knopf's respectability before he took the hook, or else she might have figured he would have been greedier if he'd known he was dipping his royalties from The Fund for The People, Inc. He also wasn't sure whether Janet had come up with the whole scheme by herself or if she and Bitzberg had acted in collusion. But since the final result was a valid contract and money in the bank, Rudy was willing to put his legitimate anger on hold, take the money, and sit tight. On the whole, he felt he'd be happier being published by Orange Bangle instead of by Knopf, since on the basis of Orange Bangle's previous track record, no one might ever find out that *The Visitation* existed. His poor dear imaginary daughter might have endured all her indignities in vain, like the fabled tree that falls, unheard, in the middle of the forest. With luck, he might not even be reviewed in *Publishers' Weekly* (Orange Bangle verged on being a vanity press), and his authorship would remain a secret shame, the easiest kind to bear.

He celebrated his windfall by renting a tape of *Close Encounters* and watching it, soused, with the sound off and Mahler's 8th on the stereo. He fell asleep as Richard Dreyfuss was heading for Wyoming to rendezvous with the aliens' mothership. He woke at 4 A.M. feeling just the way he'd felt in *The Visitation* the first time he'd been returned to his summer cabin after having been abducted and experimented on by the Xlom: his head ached, he was ravenously hungry, and he had an obscure sense that something terrible had just happened to him but he didn't know what.

The Visitation appeared in October and disappeared at once into the vast limbo of unreviewed books, at least as far as New York was concerned. Janet assured him that the real market for UFO books was in the sticks and that there the book was selling reasonably well. The lack of reviews was par for the course with crackpot books, since anyone credulous enough to take such revelations seriously was probably too dumb to write coherent prose. What was a source of concern was the lack of media attention due to what Janet diplomatically referred to as Rudy's image problem, meaning his weight. TV talk shows did not like to feature fat people unless they were famously fat. Similar consideration had prompted Orange Bangle not to put Rudy's picture on the book jacket.

Then, early in November, little Bunny Steiner made her TV debut on a late night talk show in St. Paul. The next day Rudy's phone didn't stop ringing. He claimed, quite truthfully, to know nothing about Bunny's appearance and said that until he saw a tape of the show he could not be certain it had actually been *his* Bunny who'd given such a vivid account of her abduction by the Xlom. When he tried to reach Janet, she was unreachable, and B. Franklin Grace (whom Rudy had not, previously, tried to talk to) was likewise not taking calls.

He let it ride.

The phone calls continued: from Milwaukee, from Detroit, from somewhere in West Virginia, from Buffalo, New York. Bunny got around, and everywhere she got to she seemed to make a considerable impression. Some of the phone calls were accusing in tone, with the unspoken suggestion behind them that Rudy had been personally responsible for his daughter's ordeal, a suggestion he indignantly resisted. "What kind of monster do you think I am?" he would demand of his unseen interrogators.

"Maybe a Xlom?" one of them had replied, and then hung up without awaiting his answer.

Finally, by agreeing to go to Philadelphia for his own late-night inquisition (albeit on radio), Rudy was able to obtain, as his quid pro quo, a VHS tape of Bunny's appearance on *The Brotherly Breakfast Hour*. He slipped the tape into his player, and there she was on his own TV, in the living color of her flesh, his imaginary four-year-old daughter, pretty much the way he'd described her: a blonde, curly-haired, dimple-cheeked, lisping mini-maniac, who rolled her eyes and wrang her hands and commanded the willing suspension of any conceivable disbelief as she re-told the story of her abduction. While her delivery was not verbatim, Bunny rarely strayed beyond the boundaries of the text that Rudy had written, and she never was betrayed into a significant contradiction. Her few embroideries were all in the area of the ineffable and the unspoken, quavers and semi-quavers and moments of stricken silence when she found herself unable to say just where the funny bald people with their big eyes had touched her or what they'd asked her to do. When asked such intimate questions, she would look away—into the camera—and cry real tears. This child had clearly been through experiences that words could not express. Little wonder that the media was picking up on Bunny's performance. She was a miniature Sarah Bernhardt.

Bunny's star reached its zenith just before Xmas, when *The Nation* (which you'd think would have had more dignity than to interest itself in UFOs) published a long article examining the books of Rudy, Strieber, Hopkins, and the Atlantic Monthly Press's contender, Gary Kinder, whose *Light Years* (released in June) featured color photos of UFOs taken by a one-armed Swiss farmer, Eduard Meier. The Kinder book had been expected to enjoy an even larger success than *Communion*, being buttressed not only with its snapshots but with quotes from bonafide scientists, including Stevie Wonder's sound engineer. However, before *Light Years'* release it was discovered that Wendelle Stevens, one of the investigators who'd acted as matchmaker between Meier and the author (and therefore shared in the book's royalties) was serving time in an Arizona prison on a charge of child molestation. There had been no child involved in the Meier UFO sightings, so Stevens's crime should have had no bearing on the book's credibility, as Kinder was at pains to point out in a last-minute Appendix. Nevertheless, the critic in *The Nation* made every effort to tar all four UFO books with the same brush, concentrating his most sinister innuendos on the possibility that Bunny may have been subjected to a false abduction in which Rudy had been an accomplice.

"Young children believe in Santa Claus," the man had argued, "because they *see* him, in his red suit and his white beard, filling their stockings with presents. Who could he be *but* Santa? They have no reason to suspect deceit, no suspicion that for many grown-ups bamboozling the young is its own reward. Might Bunny Steiner not have been put in the same position vis-a-vis the Xlom? Perhaps the reason her testimony has such a distressing fascination, even for UFO skeptics like myself, is that she is not lying. Perhaps the terrible events reported in *The Visitation* really did take place. Only Mr. Steiner can say with any certainty whether his daughter is one of the hoaxers—or one of the hoaxed."

Rudy's problem, of course, was that he couldn't say anything with any certainty. Janet, when he finally did get through to her, would only burble on about what a brilliant marketing strategy Bunny's TV appearances represented. She brushed aside all of Rudy's questions about who Bunny was and where she came from and how the book was selling.

"But her *scars*," he insisted nervously. "They don't look fake. How did she . . ."

Janet laughed. "Surely you don't think only aliens can perform surgery. Kids are always falling down and getting stitched back together. You shouldn't let yourself be upset by one article in one magazine."

"But what if the *police* become interested? What if they say they want to talk with Bunny?"

"*What* police, Rudy? Be reasonable. No one knows what state Bunny lives in, for heaven's sake, much less what city. And *you* are not legally responsible for her, are you? Only her mother is, only Melissa, and she's been very careful to keep both herself and Bunny out of the limelight *except* for her carefully scripted minutes before the cameras. The minute they leave that studio, Bunny's little blonde wig comes off, and she's another girl."

"But is it all an act, or . . . ?"

"No, of course not, it's all true, and she really is your daughter, conceived on board a flying saucer with the semen the Xlom stole from you one night when, according to the false memory they've implanted in your brain, you thought you were watching a rerun of the *The Sound of Music*. And *I'm* the reincarnation of Marie Antoinette."

"You know what I mean," Rudy protested, uncajoled.

"I have never met Bunny, or Melissa X. or B. Franklin Grace for that matter. And I don't see what difference it makes, whether Bunny believes what she's saying or not. She's still a consummate little actress, and her performances are earning us all a pot of money. So why look a gift horse in the mouth?"

"For the Trojans those were famous last words."

"You want reassurance? I'll reassure you. I wasn't going to tell you about this till the deal was firmed up, but at this point we're just haggling over sub-rights percentages, so what the hell. HarperCollins is taking over distribution for Orange Bangle, *on condition* that you write a final chapter bringing the story up to date. Which means you've got a real shot at the list."

"And what's in the last chapter—a searing account of my trial for child molestation?"

"No, an account of your disbelief, amazement, horror, and shock when you go to visit Bunny and her mother on Christmas Eve and you find that they've *both* been abducted. This time, since it's winter, you'll be able to take photos of where the UFO landed in the snow. Then after the first thaw you report them missing."

Rudy's jaw dropped. "To the *police*?"

"Do you know how many people are reported missing every week? Thousands. You're not saying abducted, not to the police. You just say that two people are missing who *are* missing. Who knows why? Maybe all the publicity was too much for Melissa and she decided to take Bunny and the money and disappear. Or *maybe* the Xlom decided that Bunny had to be taken somewhere where scientists couldn't examine her. In either case, your fatherly heart is broken, and all you can hope for is that some day, somewhere you'll see your little Bunny again."

"HarperCollins *wants* this? You laid this out for them in advance?"

"Well, I couldn't come right out and say what the Xlom may be intending to do. I just promised them that the last chapter would contain sensational new material. I think they got my drift. Of course, you'll have to split your royalties fifty-fifty for the new edition. On the other hand, it's not a sequel, it's just a final chapter that you can write in a weekend."

"Fifty-fifty with whom?"

"With your original publisher, Orange Bangle. I expect a good part of their cut will go to pay off Bunny and her mom. They can't be doing all this for nothing."

"Do you know what the penalty is for reporting a spurious abduction? A $10,000 fine and five years in prison."

"It won't be spurious. Bunny and her mom will have genuinely disappeared. If you *speculate* in your book that the Xlom have taken them from the face of the planet, that's just your theory. And if, later on, they should turn up somewhere else *on* the planet, all that can be inferred from that is that they're trying to avoid public attention, including yours, which they're entitled to do. But I think it highly unlikely they'll be found. The FBI isn't going to make it a top priority, and where are they going to start looking? It's a big country."

"You've discussed this with Grace?"

"Mm-hm. And he's even thrown out hints that Bunny and her mom will be returning to their original happy home, complete with a daddy and sibs. So anyone trying to track down a single woman and her blonde daughter will be following a false scent."

"And when the police ask me for information about them?"

"Grace has created a paper trail that is fairly close to the 'facts' presented in *The Visitation*. Remember all those little changes that appeared in the book after you returned the galleys? That's why they're there. That's why we made Melissa such a mystery woman. Maybe *she* was an alien! Have you ever considered that? Or maybe she's one of the first generation of genetically altered human beings that the aliens have been training to vamp humanity! But that's too good an idea to waste on this book. Keep that one in reserve, and in the ripeness of time we can approach HarperCollins with a sequel: *I Married a Xlom.*"

"But I *didn't* marry her."

"Rudy, you are such a *pedant*. Anyhow, when can I see that last chapter?"

There didn't seem to be any point in further argument. He'd written Bunny into existence. Now he would write her out of existence. "When do you need it?"

"Yesterday."

"You've got it."

The disappearance of Bunny and Melissa, when that event was finally staged, was like a long-postponed visit to the dentist. The worst of it was in the anxiety beforehand, especially in the week from Christmas through New Year's Day that he had to spend alone in the newly vacated chalet. Most of the neighboring vacation houses were standing empty at that time of year, so he was spared having to make a spectacle of himself going about and asking after his missing significant others. Of those people he did approach, only the crippled woman who tended the nearest convenience store claimed to recognize Bunny and Melissa from the photo he showed them, and all she could remember of them was that the little girl had been particularly fond of Pepperidge Farm cookies, which seemed a precocious and expensive taste in such a very young girl. "Mostly at that age their mommies buy them Ding-Dongs or Twinkies, but not that little lady. *She* got Brussels cookies, or Milanos, or Lidos. Did they skip out on their bills, is that why you're asking?" Rudy had assured her it was nothing like that.

With the police he had to be more forthcoming. He could not withhold the fact that the missing girl had figured in *The Visitation* for an earlier disappearance, which the book had ascribed to UFOs. To his relief, though the policemen obviously suspected that Bunny's latest disappearance was a repeat performance of her first, they did not seem annoyed to have been called in. Indeed, both men had their own UFO stories to relate to Rudy concerning mysterious lights that had appeared in the area around the Ashokan reservoir, moving at higher speeds and lower altitudes than could have been the case if they'd been ordinary airplanes. Rudy ended up taking more notes about their UFO sightings than they did concerning the missing girl and her mother. As the friendlier of the two policemen suggested, with a conspiratorial wink, maybe Melissa was just trying to avoid him. Maybe her arranging to spend the holiday with him had been a kind of practical joke. In any case, while it might be mysterious, it was not the sort of mystery the police ought to take an interest in.

When they left the chalet, Rudy called up Janet to jubilate and to ask her to hold up the final production of the new revised edition until he could add something about the testimony of the two policemen.

Saleswise the new edition was something of a letdown. Disappearances are in their nature hard to ballyhoo, since the person who might do the job best isn't around. An effort was made to have Rudy, despite his obesity, appear on the talk shows where Bunny had been such a hit, but most of them declined the opportunity. The few times he did appear, the shows' hosts were openly derisive. Most of their questions had to do with his earnings from *The Visitation* and his relationship with B. Franklin Grace and The People, who were in the news once again for allegedly having tried to poison Ms. Devore's litigious niece and nephew in the period before her competency hearings. Rudy was not enough of a show-man to make emotional headway against such currents, and he came off looking sheepish and creepy. He retired from the talk show circuit with a strong conviction that his fifteen minutes on the parking meter of fame had expired, a conviction that was strengthened when Janet Cruse's phone number began to connect with an answering service instead of with Janet. For a little while the answering service went through the motions of taking Rudy's ever-more-urgent messages, and then he was given the address, in Vancouver, where Janet could be contacted. So that, he thought, was the end of the Bunny Steiner story and of his own career as a father. He was wrong on both counts.

Bunny arrived in New York at the end of May, unannounced except by the driver of the taxi who had taken her from the Port Authority bus terminal to Rudy's new sublet in a brownstone on Barrow Street in the nicest part of the Village. "Your daughter's down here," the man had shouted into the intercom, and then, before Rudy could deny he had a daughter, he added: "And the charge on the meter is $4.70."

"Hello, Daddy," Bunny said, clutching her little knapsack to her chest and smiling at him as sweetly as if he were a camera.

"Bunny!"

"Mommy said I've grown so much you probably wouldn't recognize me."

"This is none of my business, Mister," the taxi driver said, with a sideways commiserating glance in Bunny's direction, "but don't you think she's a little young to be traveling around New York on her own? I mean, this isn't . . ." He raised his voice and asked of Bunny: "Where'd you say you came here from, sweetheart?"

"Pocatello," she said demurely. "That's in Idaho."

"You came all the way to New York from Idaho *on a bus*?" the taxi driver marveled.

She nodded. "That's how my dress got so wrinkled."

Rudy paid the driver six dollars, took Bunny's knapsack, and held the door open for her.

"Thank you," she said, stepping inside and heading straight for the stairs. Her hand reached up to grasp the banister. Rudy realized he'd never seen a child on the wide wonky staircase in all the time he'd been subletting his apartment. She seemed so small. Of course, children were supposed to be small, but Bunny seemed smaller than small, a miniature child.

"What is the number of your apartment?" she asked from the head of the stairs.

"Twelve. It's two more flights up."

By the time Rudy had reached the fourth floor, huffing and puffing, Bunny had already gone into the apartment and was leaning out the window that accessed to the fire escape. "You really live high up."

"Not by New York standards."

"I hope you're not mad at me," she said in a placatory tone, turning away from the window and wedging herself into the corner of the sofa. "I know I should have phoned first, but I thought if I did, you might call the police before we had a chance to talk together. I didn't know *what* I'd do if you weren't here. Do they have shopping-bag kids in New York? That's what I'd have become, I guess."

"Am I to understand that you're running away from home?"

She nodded.

"From Pocatello?" he asked with a teasing smile.

She laughed. "No, silly. That's where *Judy Garland* was from, in *A Star Is Born*. Which is one of my favorite movies of all time. We made a tape of it, and I must have seen it twenty times."

"Who is 'we'? And for that matter, who are you?"

"It's all right if you call me Bunny. I like it better than my real name, which is—" She wrinkled her nose to indicate disgust: "Margaret."

"Just Margaret? No last name?"

"On my birth certificate it says Margaret Dacey. But The People don't use last names with each other."

"Ah ha! I *wondered* if you weren't one of The People. They never told me anything about you, you know. I thought I was just making it all up, everything in the book. Even you."

"I know. They always used to make jokes about that. How surprised you were going to be when I appeared on TV. Anyhow, I'm not one of the People. My mother is, but that doesn't mean I have to be. Before The People, she was in something like the Hari Krishnas, only they didn't march around in orange clothes. I *really* hated that. Finally the Baba, who was the old man who ran the place and pretended he was an Indian (but he wasn't, he came from Utah), finally he got busted for cocaine. That was two years ago, in Portland."

"It sounds like you've had an exciting life. How old are you?"

"Guess."

"You must be older than you look. Maybe six?"

She shook her head.

"Seven?"

"No—eight and a half. I'm like Gary Coleman, everyone thinks I'm *pre*-school. When the inspectors came round to the commune to see if they were sending their kids to school like they were supposed to, they always made me go with the little kids. I've never been to a real school. But I can read almost anything. I read *your* book a couple times. And I read *The Elfin Horde*, too. And the other ones that came after. When we were living up in the cabin there wasn't much else you could do but read, you couldn't get TV. Mom was going crazy."

"So? What did you think?"

"Of *The Elfin Horde?* Oh, I loved the whole series. Only I hated it when Twa-Loora died. Sometimes at night when I'm going to sleep I'll think about her riding up to the edge of that cliff and looking back and seeing the Black Riders. And then *leaping* to certain death. And I'll start crying all over again. In fact—" She furrowed her forehead and frowned down at her hands, primly folded together in her lap. "In fact, that's why I decided to come here. Because if I went anywhere else, they would just send me right back to the commune. But I thought *you'd* understand. Because you understood Twa-Loora."

"What about your father? Couldn't you go to him?"

"I'm like the Bunny in your book. I don't have a dad. Unless *you'd* be my dad."

"Hey, wait a minute!"

But Bunny was not to be checked now. She insisted on sharing her fantasy in its full extent. And it was not (Rudy gradually, grudgingly came to see) so entirely bizarre as to be unfeasible. As Bunny herself pointed out, millions of TV viewers had already come to accept as a fact that she was his daughter, and her mother had been deeply involved in that deception. Admittedly, Bunny's birth certificate (she produced a Xerox of it from her knapsack) could not confirm Rudy's paternity, but neither did it contradict it: the space for Father's Name had been left blank. Assuming that her mother and Mr. Grace agreed to letting Rudy assume the responsibility for bringing up Bunny, it would probably not be difficult to arrange the legal details. And with the material in the knapsack it was hard to imagine them withholding their cooperation.

"You realize, don't you, that what we're discussing is blackmail?"

"But if I just took all this to the *police*, it wouldn't make things better for anyone. They'd probably put Mr. Grace in jail, and I'd be sent back to my mother, and she'd be furious with me, and we wouldn't have anywhere to live. Anyhow, she doesn't like me any more than I like her. When we're in the commune we hardly ever even talk to each other. I do have *friends* there, or I used to, but Billy's in jail now. We used to play backgammon, and he really didn't mind if I won sometimes. Mother would get furious. I'll bet she'd be tickled pink to let you have custody. She'd have been glad if the Xlom were real and they did take me away in a flying saucer. She said so lots of times, and pretended it was a joke but it wasn't, not really. It's Mr. Grace who's the problem. Every time reporters would come to the commune, he'd always have someone take me down to the basement laundry room, and I wouldn't come out until the reporters went away. It made me feel like a prisoner."

The more Bunny told about her life in The People's commune, the more Rudy realized that the girl was an As-Told-To diamond mine. What's more, she knew it too, for when he suggested that he turn on his tape deck in order to have a permanent record of the rest of the story, she agreed that that would be a good idea and she even was so thoughtful, when they started taping, to return to the point in the story when Mr. Grace first discovered Bunny and her mother busking in downtown San Diego. Bunny, in addition to her other talents, was a proficient tap-dancer, and one of her objects in adopting Rudy as her father was to be able to study dance—tap, jazz, and classic ballet—in New York City, the dance capital of the universe.

"But also," she confided, "I just *like* you. I could tell that from reading *The Visitation.*"

"Yes, but that's all made up," Rudy pointed out. "That book is just one lie after another. *You* know that."

"But you tell *nice* lies," Bunny insisted. "If you had a *real* little girl, I'll bet you'd be just the kind of daddy you say you are in the book. Is it the money you're worried about? Mother was always saying how expensive it is to have a kid."

"I hadn't even considered that side of it."

"Because when I was in Mr. Grace's office and took those other things, the dirty pictures and the rest, I also took this."

Out of her wonderful knapsack Bunny produced a file of papers showing sales figures for *The Visitation* that were, even at a glance, distinctly at variance from the figures Orange Bangle Press had provided to him. Bunny's competence as a fairy godchild was coming to seem uncanny. "How did you know . . . ?"

"They always talked to each other as though I weren't there. Maybe they thought I was that dumb. Or maybe they just forgot about me."

"And where do they think you are now? Did you leave a note, or tell anyone?"

"I left a note saying I was going to visit one of Baba's people and I told them not to go to the police. I don't think they would have anyhow. I didn't steal much more money than I needed for the bus trip. I knew if I took a lot, Mr. Grace *would* go to the police. Do you have something to eat?"

"Sure. What do you want? Is a sandwich okay?"

"Just some cookies and milk would be nice. I didn't have any breakfast when the bus stopped in New Jersey."

Rudy went into the kitchen and poured out a Daffy Duck glass-full of milk. Then he arranged three kinds of cookies on a plate. He took it as an omen that Bunny should have arrived at the moment when his cupboard was so well supplied with her favorite brand of cookie.

"There's clover for bunnies," he called out from the kitchen, quoting from his book.

And Bunny, from the living room, quoted the book back to him, making it theirs: "And here's a Bunny for the clover!" ●

POST COITUM TRISTESSE

I do not know
still I do not know
if you understand what it is
we do together,
if it is
            together. . . .
As I touch your dense, smooth skin—
with its slight scent of cumin
and citrus I wonder
how you smell to you, and what
olfactory alchemy transforms
my rank animal odor, or if
it is a matter of scents at all,
the tactility of integuments
perhaps, the sensation
of being so enwrapped
in these monkey limbs—
does it speak to some atavistic instinct,
some visceral relic of origin?
for it is hard to imagine
what a being so complete,
so ultimately unreachable
in thought or flesh,
could find appealing
in these musks and fluids
these tortured writhings. . . .
or does my adoration amuse
some decadence so deep it beggars
merely human imagination?

—David Lunde

FIFTY WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR ORGASM

by Pat Cadigan

Pat Cadigan tells us that the title for this story was suggested to her by Lawrence Person. When queried as to the effectiveness of the following, she would say only, "Your mileage may vary." Her newest novel, *Fools,* is scheduled to arrive in bookstores from Bantam/Spectra later this year.

A. A Short History of the Orgasm on Earth

For millennia before recorded history, the orgasm had existed, but in the wild, usually unrecognized, or erroneously identified as some supernatural phenomenon, a message or possibly a visitation from one or more gods, or, among tribes with a less sanguine worldview, possession by demons. Thus, the fate of some who acknowledged experiencing such a thing could be elevation to a place of honor in their community—minstrel, shaman, or supreme dictator for life—while others faced punishment in the form of crippling, exile, or even death by stoning.

It seems to have been only after the entire planet passed through a frigid epoch that the orgasm began to be perceived as something far more *personal* (see Pseudopodnote [1]) than a phenomenon of nature, such as tides, thunderstorms, and earthquakes. As usual, the chronology is mostly guess-work, since the orgasm left fewer signs of its presence than the glaciers. However, cave-wall ephemera dating from that time does seem to have been produced by humans who had more than a passing acquaintance with the concept of the orgasm as an attainable goal, at least in theory. Expert modules who have surveyed this *artwork*[2] conclude that the ancient humans' approach to orgasm was as primitive as everything else about them: the orgasm is conceived in some examples as a large, non-sapient (we assume) beast that poses a possible threat to the status quo, or possibly even existence itself (even with our restoration techniques, cave-wall ephemera is quite faint, so it is difficult to tell), and must be subdued by a number of humans acting in concert.

Evidence indicates that the same fate did not apply to each great orgasm beast, so we perforce conclude that by this time, humans had begun to differentiate orgasm *qualitatively*—i.e., some were judged to be good while others were judged to be evil. Unfortunately, we know too little to be able to determine which were the good ones and which were evil—some beasts are rendered as having been consumed, while others were flayed and used as body-upholstery; still others became fetishes for specific locations on the body, such as the hair, the ears, the nose, the neck, the arms and legs, etc., while a few were given positions as minor deities. We could postulate that consumption was for evil orgasm while godhood was reserved for the very best of the good, but that would not take into account the humans' often antagonistic relationship with their gods. So it could easily be the other way around—only the very best of the good were ingested, while the evil were given a deity's position and forced to assume all blame for any occurrence the humans regarded as having an evil quality.

The rise of *civilization*[3] is indisputable proof that the humans had finally divined the nature of orgasm with respect to themselves and took what they felt was the noblest course: they patterned their entire existence to conform to the orgasm both as concept and artifact. The journey of humans through both time and space became a tribute to the course of orgasm, always concluding with *arrival* (our nearest equivalent term), at spatial location (maps were helpfully provided so that the thoughtful human could choose whether to take the quickest or slowest route), at a point in time (they became completely dependent on calendars and other timekeeping devices, and seem to have often found it desirable to *arrive* during some phase of their planet's nearest satellite, an odd phenomenon but perhaps simply an especially long-lived—for them—tradition preserved by popular sentiment), or at a stage in life (this has a connection with their timekeeping systems).

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[1] For an explanation of this unfamiliar term, see Trans-Missive 702937: *Solitary Consciousness in the Wakeful State,* a largely theoretical but fact-based essay on the nature of life-forms that cannot or will not (!) Subscribe.

[2] *Artwork:* expression of idea/emotion emanating from some soft, vital, internal organ, sometimes the brain, sometimes the heart, and sometimes some other, such as the stomach or spleen.

[3] *Civilization:* Incredible as it may seem, replacement organisms (our closest rendering of that ultimately untranslatable word *children*) achieved existence with no immediate knowledge of necessary constraints and/or requirements except on the most brutish physical level; each one underwent a process designed to bring it into accepted formation. This formation as a whole was called *civilization.*

Having evolved (voluntarily and involuntarily) to such a noble plateau, they should have been able to take The Next Step and *arrive* at Consciousness of Universal Oneness. Instead, the journey of the humans toward Enlightenment took an unexpected and quite tragic turn that may remain inexplicable even at the Heat *Arrival,* no matter how much contemplation is devoted to it.

Still, we have managed to pinpoint the cause, at least partially. After a very short period of time, the humans, without warning, *arrived* at something called *Industrialized*[4] Society, after which they apparently *forgot all accumulated knowledge of orgasm as their purpose in life!*

It seems pretty clear that this deficit was caused by the build-up of toxic by-products of industrialization. This problem was compounded by psychic damage wrought by the existence of something so antithetical to orgasm—not to mention the absence of orgasm from the lives of the humans who would not have achieved industrialization without it. The paradox of the situation certainly must have brought them to the brink of extinction more than once, if not extinction of life itself then extinction of sapience.

However, not *all* humans had forgotten, which brings us to the overriding irony of the human condition: the fact that they had not *arrived* at Consciousness of Universal Oneness was actually what saved them (that is, for a little while).

A breed of humans seems to have arisen spontaneously in response to the tragic absence of orgasm as concept and artifact in the model of life.

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[4] *Industrialized:* a general term indicating the dominant presence of complex non-organic artifacts and devices meant to *manufacture* (i.e., to cause existence/manifestation in a predetermined and completely limited form) more complex non-organic artifacts and devices, some of which were used by humans, and some of which used humans, either for maintenance or for further *manufacturing*. Once again, it is not always clear what humans used and what used them.

These humans apparently set themselves the sacred task of restoring orgasm to humanity and, thus, humanity to orgasm. Sadly, the nobility of their intentions did not confer upon them the higher consciousness necessary for them to divine the true nature of their mission, and from our vantage point, their efforts look mindlessly mechanical. Still, they toiled mightily to remind humanity as a whole that it was once a race devoted to orgasm. Indeed, it has been speculated that even if these humans had known that their efforts were doomed ultimately to failure, they would have proceeded nonetheless, driven by a proto-selflessness we recognize as the initial potential for Consciousness of Universal Oneness, and by an abiding faith in a future *arrival*.

Of these humans, not all were very knowledgeable, highly skilled, or even completely devoted to the cause, yet all seemed to have managed to produce some positive, if temporary, result. It is from their efforts that we have distilled the following information, which could serve as a handbook for humans and which, it is felt, contains much that all life-forms could profit by.

B. 50 Ways to Improve Your Orgasm

The information contained herein was distilled from the many and varied sources of recorded information, some of which resisted all usual methods of extraction. In these cases, we were forced to improvise, sometimes even in the interpretation of the yield. Even so, it will be clear that the spirit of the information was preserved.

It must be emphasized here that since humans were life-forms that always occupied a particular place in space and time, orgasm was a given and a constant. Thus, what follows is not a listing of methods to induce orgasm, but to improve the orgasmic experience.

Subgroup #1: Orgasm by Aural Stimulation

1. *Noise, Unorganized*

In the case of the humans, the greater the population density, the more noise was present (unbelievers must temper their skepticism of this fact with the understanding that they may be provincial). Possibly in an instinctive groping toward the concept of Universal Oneness, humans' proximity to each other increased steadily, while the effectiveness of barriers to noise was lowered. Humans lived with the constant sound of other humans or their machines stimulating them aurally. Eventually, this would cause them to *arrive* in another location. Those who did not live in large centers of dense population activated various sorts of artificial receptors which brought any desired and/or random noise to them.

2. *Noise, Organized*

Usually produced by artificial receptors, on occasion by humans singly or in groups. The latter often took place in large gathering places, where humans assumed one of two roles: listener or listenee. Listenees were, almost without exception, given noise by the listeners when they had concluded their own presentation of noise. Some listenees considered themselves to have *arrived* if this happened often enough in certain ways.

3. *Noise, Specific*

Humans often isolated certain patterns of noise and listened to them in a state that was also isolated.

4. *Noise, Organic*

Human bodies themselves were a source of various noises and were listened to sometimes by one human or in tandem with a few others. This seemed to be successful, as human records are rife with notations about humans having *arrived* at a conclusion (sometimes by jumping) or at a diagnosis (closest equivalent term: prognostication). Unfortunately, the latter sometimes proved fatal to individuals, for reasons we have yet to understand.

5. *Noise, Bestial*

Many humans listened deliberately to species of limited sapience, even some that were non-sapient. A few of these humans became outright perverts, however, in that the *animals* were made to assume the *arrival*. Example: "*Arrive* here, Rover! *Arrive, arrive!* Good dog! Heal!" (The *non sequitur* plea for corporeal restorative manipulation seems to be not only how the perversion manifested—perhaps an inadvertent cry for help?—but also a systematic way of asking/telling other like perverts in the vicinity to make themselves known.) Note: this is considered perversion when it is only the animal who *arrives* at the human and the human never *arrives* at the animal. Many humans, however, took the novel approach of joining the animals (cf, "walking the dog") and both would *arrive* somewhere together, usually with a straplike thing held between them. This was both condoned and encouraged.

Subgroup #2: Orgasm by Visual Stimulation

6. *Watching, Everything*

Watching, seeing, looking, ogling, staring, peering, and peeking were all used by humans to determine what locations in space they might want to go to and thus *arrive* at. Some humans' visual intake was indiscriminate and profligate, but this was probably a reaction to their visual perception being confined to a very tiny area of the spectrum. See other references to glaring, glowering, frowning, glancing, squinting, keeping an eye on (cross-reference with tactile subgroup), being on the look-out (post-*arrival* wariness, which seems to be a contradiction in terms), and "why don't you watch where you're *arriving!*" (a good question).

7. *Watching, Humans*

Humans spent a lot of time looking at each other, many times as a prelude to offering orgasm. Example: "Why don't you *arrive* up [here] and see me sometime?" or the even more preliminary "Is that a foreign object lodged in your upholstery [nearest equivalent terms] or are you just glad to see me?" See also *Human Rhetorical Language: Myth Or Reality?*

8. *Watching, Objects*

Many humans spent a good part of their lives looking at objects, some stationary, some animated yet technically inorganic and not alive. Some of them participated in a kind of game on extremely long and narrow playing fields, in which one human, after perceiving another pursuing *arrival* in an object called a car (see below), would give chase until the first human brought the car to a halt, at which point, the second human would *arrive* at the first human. The second human was always upholstered ceremonially, while no particular upholstery was required for the other player. The second human usually bestowed an artifact that seems to have been a token of admission to another spatial location of *arrival*. It is surmised that the interruption was the reason for displeasure in the other player, but this occurred with such regularity and was obviously so integral to the game that we can only wonder why those humans who were angered by it didn't just quit playing.

9. *Watching, Passive*

Some humans did nothing other than sit while they watched something. May be illustrative of the human motto/instruction(?): "If Mohammed will not *arrive* at the mountain, then the mountain will *arrive* at Mohammed."

10. *Watching, Aggressive*

Some humans moved very energetically, even if only in place (see below, Orgasm in Groups), usually while exhorting fellow humans to *arrive*. Example: "*Arrive,* you bums, you're only three games out of first!" (The words translate but the idea doesn't; obviously idiomatic usage.) The effectiveness of these exhortations was irregular and unpredictable.

11. *Watching, Dominant*

In some situations, the role of the observer took major importance; who was watching mattered as much as, and sometimes more than the incident or object under surveillance. The very presence of an observer could induce an *arrival* by a group in a location called courts-o-law [translator's best guess].

12. *Watching, Submissive*

Humans possessed a great deal of curiosity. Sometimes groups of them would gather spontaneously and without warning to stare at the results of machinery malfunction or miscalculation, or at the composition or deliberate dismantling of any sheltering structure. Others concealed the fact of their observation by obscuring their presence and peering through cavities for access tools ("keyholes" in the original; untranslatable). Their observations had little or no effect on the course of the events unfolding before them, but at least they got to *arrive* somewhere.

13. *Watching, Symbols*

Human society is considered by many to be backward simply because they would *arrive* first and then watch symbols, which were projected onto some central location by means of light.

Subgroup #3: Orgasm by Tactile Stimulation

14. *Full Body Contact*

Humans often immersed themselves in a liquid medium (boundaries varied), ceremonially upholstered (and sometimes ceremonially divested of all upholstery), and emulated aquatic life-forms. Some were fond of traversing a gap called "the English Channel" just before their *arrival* on a landmass. Others hurtled from great heights, abandoning conveyances they called "planes" borne on air currents, choosing to *arrive* without mechanical means somewhere on the planet. It has not been determined whether the pleasure of *arrival* was enhanced by the casting off of the conveyance, the displaying of an upholstery adjunct meant to fan out overhead by catching the wind (see similar: peacocks, other Earth birds), or the physical force of the *arrival* itself.

15. *Partial Body Contact*

"Feet," body parts meant for conveyance of the body without mechanical means, were most often placed in contact with ground or ground-covering just prior to *arrival*. This was much admired; many humans professed the notion that "only if you had your feet on the ground" was it possible to "get anywhere" (one of their more endearing double entendres). Often, whole groups of them would *arrive* at special configurations to cheer on other humans whose feet were repeatedly contacting special ground-covering just before they *arrived* at a conclusion ("finish line" in the original). (See: serial *arriving* in human society.)

16. *No Body Contact*

It became more and more popular, especially near the end, for humans not only to upholster themselves but to encase themselves in conveyances. Whether they were knowingly emulating certain lower life forms (see: snails; hermit crabs) in deliberate tribute, or unknowingly in a regressive state cannot be determined. But it seems to have had something to do with the sudden fad for *arriving* as soon as possible.

17. *By Proxy*

Humans prevented from *arriving* somewhere themselves sometimes sent inanimate objects or noise (!) as a substitute. In some cases, other humans would replace them. Undoubtedly, these other humans experienced the *arrival,* which had to be a source of great frustration for those humans whose *arrival* had been rendered void.

18. *By Upholstery*

There is some disagreement as to whether upholstery belongs in the tactile sensation subgroup. The majority consensus is that because the upholstery was on the body, it was necessarily a tactile stimulation and not just incidental. Much of it was as ceremonial as it was protective, and it was the rare human who did not upholster in direct connection to an immediate *arrival.* This would seem to be borne out by one of their surviving texts, *Upholster For Results* (untranslatable original: *Dress For Success*).

Subgroup #4: Miscellaneous

Obviously, this is by far the largest subgroup and arguably a subgroup consisting of subgroups rather than normal components. Also, some items listed here may seem to overlap previous subgroups, but our uncertainty as to degree of overlap has caused them to be placed here. This situation cannot be helped—the humans were just too alien for normal quantifiers to apply. For now, this solution will have to stand unless/until deeper understanding of the human condition is attained.

19. *Orgasm in Cars*

Cars were a member of a group of conveyances (others: trucks, buses, trains, planes, bikes, scooters, roller skates, skateboards), and the most popular of the conveyances among humans. Humans exercised direct control over their cars and enjoyed *arriving* in them so much that they often owned more than one. Sometimes the conveyance accommodated two or more people, and everyone would *arrive* at the same time. Most often, *arrival* by car was a two-pronged event—first, there was the *arrival* in the car itself, followed by the abandonment of the car in the designated *arrival*-by-car location and the humans proceeding on feet to another arrival. Sometimes there were multiple *arrivals.* Recognizing this as one of the most desirable of all situations, humans constructed great shelters called "malls" (completely untranslatable; nearest equivalent term:

"temporary hive") comprising many small loci. Humans sought to *arrive* at as many as possible within a given time limit.

20. *Orgasm in Groups*

Humans most often tried to compose their groups of other humans they were familiar with. However, when it was not possible for them to be accompanied by more familiar humans, they would apply for admission to any available group. Some groups were very large and *arrived* in enormous stadia constructed for the express purpose of containing them while they gyrated wildly, exhorting other humans divided into teams to *arrive* at what was considered a position of exceptional merit and thus superior (see: inferior, anterior, exterior, and posterior). Acceptance in these groups was a foregone conclusion. Denial more often took the nature of postponement and admission to another group planning an *arrival* at a later point in time. The temporal aspect could often take precedence over all other considerations and in a lot of cases was elevated to an outright fetish. Examples: "I can *arrive* for a later showing," and "You've got to get me on that flight [whether this is the conveyance or the people on the conveyance is unclear]—I've got to *arrive* for a three o'clock meeting [another group situation, the nature of which is nebulous]!"

21. *Orgasm in Public*

Without question, over half of all *arrivals* took place not only in public, but in areas set up specifically for that purpose. The ceremonial and/or religious aspects of these areas are not always overt.

22. *Orgasm in Private*

Often ascribed to a class of humans labeled "a thief in the night" (see: private property as sacred mythology, and planetary rotation, undue importance of).

23. *Orgasm in the Non-Waking State*

Humans' physiology had the peculiar side-effect of inducing illusions in those who were non-wakeful, which begs the question of how effective their repose actually was. These illusions often involved *arrivals* at unattainable points of time and/or space, and/or of unlikely situations. Example: "I dreamed [experienced an illusion] I *arrived* in Atlantic City and was crowned [anointed?] Miss America [mythological creature] in my Virginconfigured [untranslatable] upholstery." (The upholstery has a specific name, but it is a pointless differentiation.)

24. *Orgasm in the Waking State*

All other *arrivals*. Sometimes expressed as: "Wake up. We have almost *arrived*." (It was considered more acceptable to *arrive* with all participants in the wakeful state.)

25. *Unauthorized Orgasm*

This sometimes took the form of active fleeing from one location to *arrive* at another, and other times, an *arrival* at a spatial location to which admission was, for some reason, conditional if not actually denied. In the first instance, it is not the location of *arrival* that is as important as the leaving of the previous point in space. In the second instance, the *arrival* point is more important than where the human started out from. (See breaking and entering.)

26. *Seasonal Orgasm*

Two seasons were recognized by certain classes of humans: season, and off-season. The off-season *arrival* was seen as desirable for reasons we cannot fully divine at this point—something to do with transitory population densities and possibly recompense for aid in *arriving* (perhaps one of the most alien concepts we have encountered). Humans as a whole did seem to *arrive* more often in more different places when the air was at a higher temperature.

27. *Orgasm by Friction*

Humans had a high friction factor in their dealings with themselves, for reasons which may best be left uncovered. When friction increased beyond a certain measurable level (though how they measured it is also a mystery), they would *arrive* en masse at a mutually agreed location and proceed *to disagree to the point of multiple deaths.* The contradictory nature of this is so clearly manifest that the situation should have ceased due to implosion: if the location for *arrival* was agreed on, and *arrival* itself was accepted by all participants, how then was it possible for disagreement not only to ensue, but to be maintained for what often turned out to be indefinite and lengthy (for a short-lived species) periods of time?

28. *Orgasm on Demand*

The passive and active roles here are not as clear-cut as they might seem on first encounter. Some humans told others where to *arrive,* and of those on the receiving end of these orders, some obeyed, and some didn't.

29. *Orgasm by Manipulation: Passive*

Many humans depended on other humans to help them *arrive,* doing nothing to bring it about while the other human did everything. This was willing on both parts, requiring only a simple request from the passive participant. Example: "Cause me to *arrive* at 44th and Lexington." Both participants *arrived* there together.

30. *Orgasm by Manipulation: Active*

See previous entry; this would, of course, be the human who did everything. Sometimes these humans did not wait for requests, but solicited them. Example: "Cause you to *arrive* somewhere, buddy?" This also seems to have involved an exchange of inert materials, from one human's upholstery or upholstery adjuncts, to another's, and sometimes a further exchange in the opposite direction was needed as well. (See: ritual a superstition.)

31. *Delayed Orgasm*

What it sounds like. Example: “I will *arrive* tomorrow.” It seems o that a pleasure-loving species would delay *arrival* as they delayed oth less pleasurable activities, usually things called “reports” [untranslat ble], “term papers” [untranslatable and incomprehensible], and “payi bills” [nearest equivalent term: “proffering tribute for acquisition”].

32. *Orgasm by Ingestion of Liquids*

Usually by request: “Why don’t you *arrive* for coffee?” or “Let’s *arri* for a few drinks.” The former was usually a sequential thing—first t *arrival,* then the coffee (a type of ingestable liquid). In the latter cas the sequence was more rewarding: first there would be the *arrival,* f lowed by the ingestable liquids, which would then in turn cause mo humans to *arrive* at a great altitude, or at least what they perceived a great altitude (see: humans and “getting high”).

33. *Orgasm by Ingestion of Solids*

Similar to the previous entry, but seldom if ever resulting in *arriv* at great altitudes, though there were exceptions. Example: “Wow, I’ getting a real sugar high.”

34. *Orgasm by Ingestion of Other Substances*

Similar to “drinks” but often showing greater results in a short period of time (see humans and “getting really, really high”), and som times resulting in *arrival* at courts-o-law and prisons [untranslatab and inconceivable].

35. *Orgasm by Printed Matter*

Stationary symbols on inanimate surfaces were credited with helpi humans *arrive* somewhere, usually at a station in life. Example: “Y have to study if you want to ‘get anywhere.’ ”

36. *Orgasm in Inanimate Objects*

As ridiculous as it seems, there were thousands of humans devoted changing the location of inanimate objects on a daily basis. Those h mans so engaged planned their own *arrivals* around the quantity a size of the objects. Recipient humans insisted on ascribing *arrival* to t objects themselves. Example: “It *arrived* in the mail.” Sometimes t human factor was recognized: “The maleman [an accepted redundanc *arrived* with it this morning.”

37. *Orgasm for Its Own Sake*

Only illustratable by example: “You can’t *arrive* there from her Thus, humans were led to the conclusion: “It will be necessary to *arri* somewhere else first.”

38. *Orgasm by Remote Control*

Similar to orgasm in inanimate objects and recognized as a less-tha perfect substitute. Example: “It’s the next best thing to *arriving*.”

39. *Orgasm by Use of Objects: Inert*

Usually in a confined space. Example: “It’s late, I think I’ll *arrive* at bed.”

40. *Orgasm by Use of Objects: Self-Contained Power Source*

Also in restricted areas, a class of objects known as appliances. Example: “If you’re going to *arrive* at the refrigerator, get me a beer.” The refrigerator may have commemorated the frigid epoch. Another example: “You can *arrive* at the oven and find your supper contained within.” The translation is unfortunately awkward, but nonetheless true to the literal meaning.

41. *Orgasm by Threat of Impending Death*

Since humans were separated each from another, one death did not necessarily mean another. Sometimes the death threat was inner-directed. Example: “I’ll just die if I don’t get to *arrive* with the other kids [replacement life-forms]!”

42. *Orgasm with a Partner: One’s Own*

Humans did have one custom that, as far as any can tell, is unique: many bonded with one other human for long periods of time—decades or, in some instances, until one of them died, possibly from over-bonding, the stress of longevity, or both. During that time, the humans set aside certain hours during which they would seldom, if ever, *arrive* anywhere without the partner; this includes the waking state. It is quite extraordinary to find this in creatures whose short lifespan necessarily dictated a short attention span.

43. *Orgasm with a Partner: Someone Else’s*

The humans had a slogan: “Variety is the [flavor-tingle] of life,” and they lived by it. While partnered humans did adhere to the hours set aside for *arriving* with their partners, they were profligate about their off-hours. It is theorized that some reaction to prolonged daylight stimulated the drive to *arrive,* at least in a certain percentage of them. Arrangements were made for the hyperactive human to *arrive* daily with a set group of other humans who were similarly partnered. Mostly their *arriving* was restricted to one general location which they left for a very short period in the middle of the day. During the time that they were absent, they would *arrive* somewhere nearby and ingest solids, before *arriving* again at the first location. Initially, it was thought that such displays of prowess were merely the by-product of excess hormones; however, there is stronger evidence that indicates these so-called displays were not treated as displays and were, in fact, regarded as very ordinary.

44. *Multiple Orgasm, Serial Variety: Indoor Form*

This differs from orgasm in groups in that although a group is necessary, it need not be a cohesive group and the multiple orgasm in question is not enjoyed by a member of the group, but always by someone outside of it. In the indoor form, use was made of ingestable liquids, solids, or both—a human would move through an indoor setting, offering these ingestibles to a large group of people, most often broken down into subgroups of two, three, or four. The ingestables were seldom refused, and the human would *arrive* at several sub-groups within a *very* short period of time. Apparently, the more a human could *arrive* in this setting, the more desirable it was considered to be by the group, which made gifts of talismans and fetishes before some of them retired from the scene. Stimulated, no doubt, by the multiple *arrivals* they had just witnessed, they wanted to *arrive* somewhere themselves.

45. *Multiple Orgasm, Serial Variety: Outdoor Form*

Once again, we have the set-up of a human *arriving* at several different groups and/or individuals, in this case at the entry-point of sheltering structures. At times, the *arrival* itself is the endpoint, and a new *arrival* is pursued and enacted immediately afterward; at other times, penetration follows *arrival,* and there may be further, less intense indoor *arrivals.* (See mythology: "The *Arriving* Salesman Joke.")

46. *Orgasm at High Velocities*

The use of a conveyance is almost always involved, though the number of participants varies. Some humans apparently placed great importance on *arriving* as quickly as possible. It is surmised that the pleasure factor was low; there may have been a sense of obligation on the part of the humans.

47. *Orgasm Induced by Small, Enclosed Spaces*

A particular conveyance, almost always contained within a large, sheltering structure, was used to facilitate *arrival* of humans either singly, or in groups, at levels perpendicular to a vertical line of travel. Humans frequently experienced *false arrival,* which occurred when the conveyance paused at levels they had not planned to *arrive* at. (See possession of large objects: "This is my floor.")

48. *Out-of-Body Orgasm*

While all humans were corporeal, some claimed the ability to travel in essence, *arrive* at a different location, and then return, *arriving* in their own corporeal forms. This was considered controversial in some quarters and rude in others. Further study is needed to determine the exact nature of this *arrival.*

49. *The Final Orgasm*

Here we find the most amazing feature of human life: if humans did not, within a certain period of time, perform some accepted number of *arrivals,* they *arrived* beneath the planet's surface, a place to which they were permanently restricted. These final *arrivals* were facilitated by groups of humans while those to *arrive* in the soil remained completely passive.

50. *Pseudo-Orgasm or Simulated Orgasm*

This is the most puzzling feature of human life: humans, more often in pairs but sometimes in greater numbers, would claim to be *arriving* even though there was no preceding transit. While there was some movement, it was not any form of travel. Nonetheless, humans revered it highly, and usually made a great deal of noise about it. Example: "I'm *arriving!* I'm *arriving!* Oh, deity!" They would also query each other: "Did you arrive?" An affirmative answer was highly desirable, while a reply of, "No, I didn't *arrive,* but really, it was very nice and I enjoyed it," was met with confusion, sadness, or even distaste. It is theorized that Pseudo-Orgasm was a function or side-effect of strange flaws in the biochemical system, causing illusions of having *arrived* somewhere. Compare this to *Orgasm in the Non-Waking State,* in which humans know that the *arrival* is false. This is not the case here, and perhaps it is an error to list it with the other forty-nine.

This concludes all research to date, though further study is highly recommended. Humans were an aberration, but one that deserves our attention, if only so that we can discover how they came to forget Orgasm as their purpose for existence and relegated it to the realm of strictly physical phenomena.

To that end, we have obtained scrapings of human interior framework, and are about to proceed with a regeneracy program. As soon as we have two or more examples of human life, we plan to have them try out all fifty ways to improve orgasm—yes, even the false orgasm—in conjunction with the restoration of racial memory, should we find they carry any.

The results of this experiment should be fruitful, and will be available for examination as soon as they can be structured for perception.

And now, while the humans regenerate in the vat, we are going to test out another human motto while we *arrive* somewhere else. There is no question that humans enjoyed *arriving,* but they also seem to have enjoyed aspects that were only tangential to *arriving.* So we are going to see if there is any truth to the old human motto: "The process of *arriving* is half the fun."[5]

Who knows but that this may further improve the orgasm itself?●

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[5] Compare and contrast with another human motto: "No matter where you *arrive,* there you have *arrived.*"

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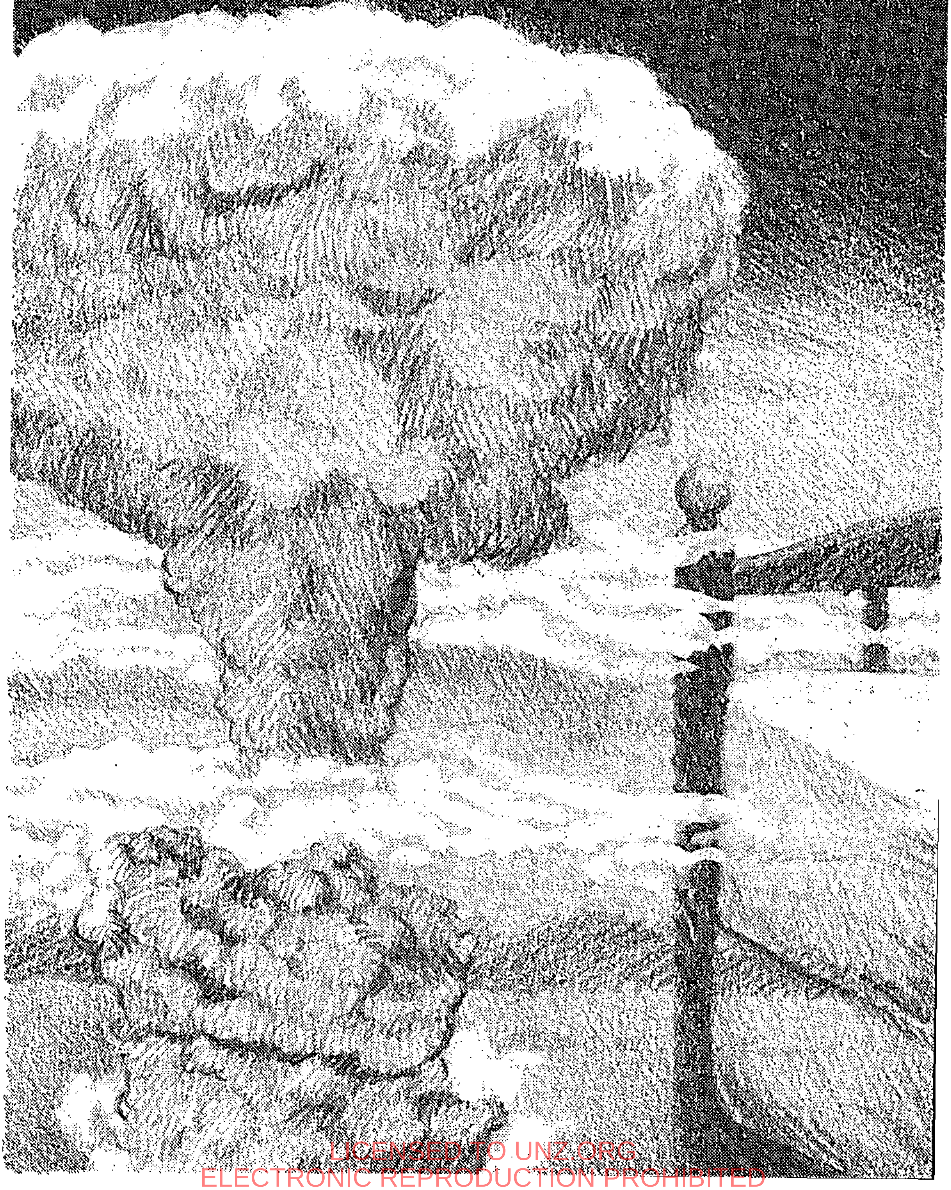
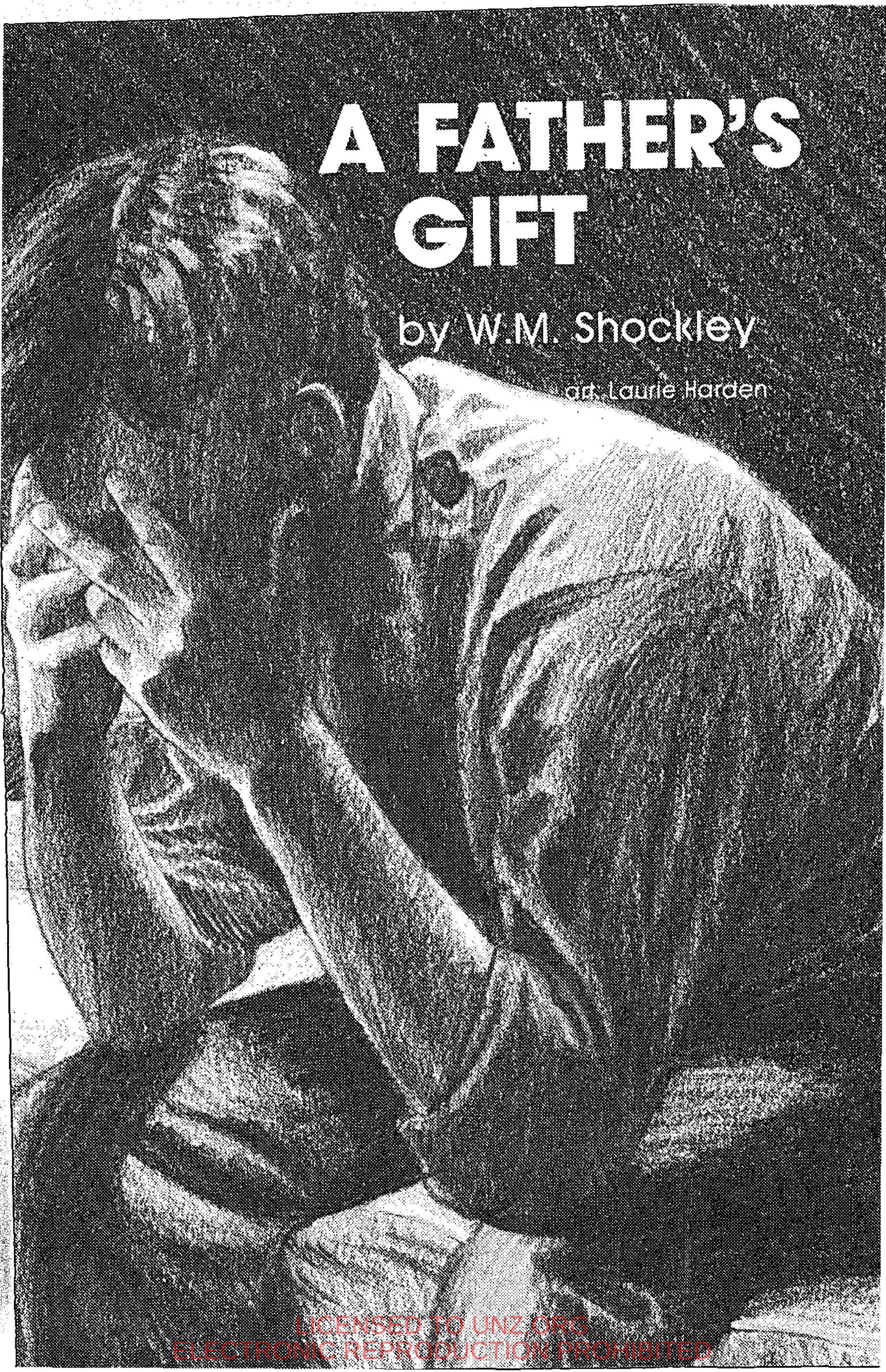


A FATHER'S GIFT

by W.M. Shockley

art: Laurie Harden



Life was nearly perfect for Joshua Benjamin Yosevs until the summer of his thirty-fourth year. He had his wife, Socorro, and the two boys, Kevin and Harlow. Both his parents were still alive, although he hadn't spoken to his father in eight years.

And then, during one hot Saturday in August, a small pogrom from seventeenth century Poland invaded his mind. The calvary rampaged, raped, and murdered seventeen Jews. The next year, his thirty-fifth, in August a nineteenth century Russian pogrom attacked him. There were more, at shortening intervals, with skips in the chronology. But always the butcheries came from the past and moved ever closer to the present.

Again it was August. Joshua was thirty-six when things took a violent lurch toward the worst.

In his backyard, Joshua rocked slowly in the hammock, listening to Kevin teasing Harlow with a frisbee. The boys could get along together for all of three minutes before Harlow started crying. Joshua had scolded Kevin countless times, but Kevin always teased and teased until Harlow cried. It was building now.

"Get it, boy," Kevin said.

Harlow yipped like a dog, his yelps fading as he ran from the arching sycamores which held the hammock. The world's best kids—Joshua knew they would learn to get along some day. It would just take them some time.

Time to get up and stop the teasing, Joshua decided, but Socorro responded first, shouted, "Don't get him too hot, Kevin." She wasn't going to wait for Kevin to make Harlow cry.

Joshua turned his head and started the hammock swinging. A blur in the distance had to be Harlow, wobbling. He was funny to watch as he ran. He was getting the knack. He had learned to run before he walked, taking short, fast trips before falling. As he learned to slow down, though, he forgot how to run. Only now was it coming back to him.

Socorro was wearing shorts in the heat, and Joshua noticed the map pattern of the varicose veins near her knee. The faint blue barely showed under the nut-brown tone. Why, when they made love, or when he stroked her legs, did the veins not ruffle the surface? That wonderful surface. Her legs, when shaven, were smooth. Perfectly smooth, and yet offering the perfect degree of resistance. Even with the varicose veins, her legs were something to behold. To hold. One, dangling over the table, bounced slowly against the bench. Later, he thought. When the boys were asleep. Saturday night. He'd been too tired last night. Thirty-six and too tired!

"Kevin!" Socorro shouted. "Let him have it." Wrong choice of words, Joshua corrected silently.

"Oh, Mom," Kevin said. "He's better than a dog."

"No fleas," Joshua offered. As usual, Socorro ignored Joshua's attempt at humor. She had talked to him about joking when she was trying to discipline the kids. Lectured him.

"That's enough, Kevin. When he gets that one, that's it. I don't want him too hot."

"Can I call Jeremy to play?" Kevin asked.

"Ask your father."

Joshua kept his eyes closed, not wanting to have to say "no" to his son. He heard Kevin approaching.

"He's resting his eyes," Kevin said.

Uncle Morry, Joshua thought, the family tradition, "rested his eyes" after dinner in the recliner. He never slept there, only rested his eyes, snoring like a steam radiator. Uncle Morry, who always brought candy bars when he visited. The candy bars made Mother mad. But Joshua's father would defend his brother Morry, not his wife.

What kind of man was he, who would take his brother's side in preference to his wife? Joshua knew what kind of a father he had. Now, he knew. He's in the synagogue right now, no time for children, no time for Mother. I'll never, Joshua vowed for the thousandth time, treat *my* kids like that. Kids were far more important.

"Yes," Joshua said, "go call Jeremy. He can come over here and you can both play with Harlow." The wisdom of Solomon: make it so Kevin didn't want to go.

Kevin started to complain, but when Joshua opened his eyes, he saw Kevin running toward the back door. He ran better than Harlow by a long shot. Of course, Harlow would do as well when he was nine, too. They'd get older, learn more things, marry, but Joshua would always know them, love them. He'd never disown them, pretend they were dead, cease to love them.

The patterns of the leaves and branches overhead shifted slightly. Everything seemed to move sideways, as if an earthquake had hit the hammock. After an initial queasiness, Joshua recognized the warmth as it crept up from his toes.

Oh shit, he thought. Why me? He knew another "vision" was coming. Another pogrom, another massacre. Why? he wondered. Why now? He didn't want another vision. At all. Ever. There was too much blood in them. But he had no choice. Dr. Veille had told him that they were probably some sort of seizures that might be controlled by phenobarbitol. Phenobarb—he had spent many a college night trying to get phenobarb. Probably the phenobarb would not work anyway—these were not normal seizures; somehow he knew that instinctively.

Grey uniforms—god-damned Nazis in S.S. uniforms, forming a line. Inside the line, the Jews were packed tightly together, some screaming, some crying, some oddly silent, dull with resignation. One woman's nose was flattened against the hair of the man in front of her. She was crying silently. Like some monstrous multilimbed insect, the naked people inside the line of guards crawled slowly forward. The guards jeered and lashed them on.

He could not move to help. He could only witness. As always. He wanted to scream. He could not. He just *watched*, watched through tightly closed eyes as the line was whipped relentlessly forward. A woman of sixty fell to the ground; she smiled as she was crushed underfoot. The rest pressed forward, surged forward, were beaten forward. At the end of the line, ten naked men and seven naked woman were lined up against a rock cliff. A machine gun fired; tiny holes appeared, as if by some sinister magic, spouting red. The bodies fell into a very large pit where others were already piled, some still writhing, most unmoving.

Eight men and seven women took their places against the cliff face, and the red spouted again. And again.

"Joshua!"

The machine gun fired again.

"Joshua!!"

And *again*.

Joshua opened his eyes. He saw Socorro's concerned black eyes staring down at him.

"What's the matter?"

"I . . ." He had to clear his throat before he could speak. "I had another . . ."

"Poor baby," she said. "Okay now?"

"No. It was . . . No. Yeah. It was—"

Harlow interrupted. "Can I ride on rocking Daddy?"

Socorro laughed, rubbed his head. "No, Daddy's done rocking the hammock now," she said. She picked him up onto her hip. God, Joshua thought, I wish I could hug them as easily as she does. It didn't feel right to him. Thanks again to Father. But there was more to love than the physical.

Joshua reached out and stroked the back of Socorro's leg. The contact soothed him. The vision was over, receding. And Socorro was here, here and now, in the present. The sexiest part of a female body, he thought, the back of the leg. He squeezed her his desire.

"Later," she winked. She put Harlow down, kissed him on the head, and sent him into the house. "This was bad?"

"This was bad," he echoed. "It looked like World War II. They're moving closer and closer to the present."

"Are you ready to see Dr. Veille again?"

"No, drugs won't help. I *know* that."

"How?" she asked him, "*how* do you know that?" He didn't *know* how he knew. He just knew that this wasn't a problem that doctors or drugs could treat. This was not merely some abnormal form of epilepsy. It wasn't that simple.

"We've got to do *something*."

Joshua turned and sat awkwardly, his feet barely touching the ground. He tried to stand, but his legs gave way and he fell to the ground.

"Klutz," Socorro laughed quietly, but Joshua could feel the concern behind the voice. How many words like *klutz* did she use now? How many words like *mijo* did he?

Joshua laughed his agreement, yes—it was always tricky getting out of a hammock, wasn't it—not admitting that it was a lack of strength in his legs which had made him fall, not wanting to add to her worry. This vision had taken a lot out of him, more than any of the others.

At first, the visions had come only rarely. Now they were occurring more and more frequently. All were visions of murder and butchery, blood and brutality. From the seventeenth century until World War II. And all the victims were Jews.

Jews. All the victims had been Jews. Joshua had been brought up as a practicing Jew. At thirteen, he had stood before the Torah next to his adoring father. His first public speaking—he remembered the terror. And the money, which put him through college. As long as he'd embraced Judaism, anyway, his father was adoring. But when Joshua committed the crime of atheism in his fourteenth year, his father had turned his face away. Shocked. Scandalized. Unforgiving. His father became cold and distant—if he won't talk to God, he doesn't need to talk to *me!* the old man had bellowed. The phrase became an incantation. He spoke only to correct his son. Mealtimes became a deadly chore. God, Joshua had hated dinner!

Religion, Joshua understood early, meant more to his father than blood, than family. God meant more than love. If Joshua would not have the Lord, then neither would he have his father's love.

Three days out of Princeton's M.B.A. program, two weeks before he started his job, Joshua married Socorro. That was it, the final blow. "He married an Indian!" became the new refrain. Socorro was not kosher. Beautiful, but not Jewish, not even *white*. Trayfe. Not even mentioned in Scripture! Central America was not in the Scriptures. (But then, neither was North America, South America, most of Asia, etc.)

Socorro was love and joy and freedom. At the wedding, she reveled in the fact that she was four months pregnant with Kevin, completely unashamed. The contest between honoring his father and cleaving unto his wife had been no contest at all: Socorro won. She would *always* win. The *boys* would always win. Who needed the old man, anyway? For ten years, he had not come to look at his own grandchildren, had not spoken to his son. His God must be a cold comfort.

After the boys had been told for the final time to stay in bed, Socorro and Joshua lay together. The television flickered a pale blue light and whispered in the background. Joshua liked making love with some light in the room. He could see all the fine smoothness that he felt.

"I called your father today," Socorro said.

"You *what?*" Joshua was aware that he had spoken too loudly.

"I explained about your dreams."

He sat up against the scrolled headboard. "They're not dreams."

"I know that. *You* know that. I was in a hurry to get his attention before he hung up on me."

"You called him!" She nodded her head. "Really?" He found it impossible to believe.

"He wants to talk to you. He's coming tomorrow night for dinner."

Joshua stood up. "Dinner? He's coming *here?*" He started pacing around the bed. "For *dinner?*" My mother will be in trouble, he thought. Harlow will blow her cover. "Hi, Gramma," he'll say, and father will know that she's been sneaking visits.

"I'm making a kosher ham," Socorro said, keeping a straight face for a long moment before breaking up. Reluctantly, Joshua laughed too. "God, I really ought to—but Mother is bringing her own food."

And her own dishes, Joshua added silently. But her joke had broken Joshua's mood.

"I already told Kevin to pretend he doesn't know grandma," Socorro said. She was so smart. Nothing to do about Harlow, though. He couldn't keep a secret, not at three.

But then, his father would ignore his grandchildren as he had ignored his own children, so he probably wouldn't notice. What could children know? What could children offer? They were not old enough to talk about God, after all.

"Why? Why did you call him?"

"We've got to do *some*thing."

"I know just the something, too," he said, putting it all out of his mind. He tugged her back to the bed.

Joshua helped the frail, old—so suddenly old!—man out of the front seat of the car. He felt so light, so brittle. He might break if dropped. Certainly this wraith could not hold much power over him anymore.

"You see?" the old man said—it was the same voice, the same old tone, pitched slightly higher—"you see what it is to throw over your God?" No

"Hello, son,"—he hadn't spoken Joshua's name in twenty-two years—no hello of any kind, nothing but God first, and the lecture.

"Oh, Pop." Joshua hated himself for reverting to a phrase he hadn't used in years. Still, he found it hard to hold onto the anger. The old man was too pitiful a sight.

"You have heard, of course, the stories!" The old man walked on his own, but Joshua's mother walked close by, with one hand ready to reach out and steady him.

"This must be Socorro," she said. Always the diplomat, always willing to step into the fray, even when her husband would side with Uncle Morry. "And Kevin and Harlow."

Kevin said a simple, "Hello," smiled obviously behind his hand, and tried not to laugh. Harlow chirruped his glad welcome in a language which the old man would not grasp, would not even *try* to understand. His father, the redoubtable Benjamin Yosevs, simply did not listen to children. His own or other people's.

"We brought our own food," Benjamin informed Joshua, pointedly ignoring Socorro. Socorro shrugged a smile at Joshua. Her body told him, "It's what I expected."

Joshua was not happy to have to endure the rituals before eating. Kevin kept asking questions with his eyes and body. But his father was a guest and would not have eaten otherwise. The meal itself was anticlimactic. His father ate in stony silence. Just like dinner at home, the same, the same slow torture.

After dinner, Joshua helped his father to the sofa in the living room, while Socorro and his mother stayed in the kitchen with the boys. Joshua sat in his own chair, but he did not recline it.

"The visions—you have them, too?" The old man looked at Joshua with a troubled expression.

"Too?"

"What did you see?" His father asked.

"See. Hear. Smell. Everything. Massacres, pogroms, murders, mass executions."

"Names?" The old man asked quietly. "Did you receive names?"

"No. What do you mean, names?"

His father smiled painfully. "You will receive names. You *will.* You must act when you do. You *must.*" He was as serious in this as in anything Joshua could remember. He slumped back onto the sofa when he finished speaking. Old, Joshua thought. He was so old. In the ten years gone by, he had seemed to age twenty, going from a vigorous seventy to *this.*

"Why? What did you see?"

His father grimaced noticeably, took a deep breath. "It is very distressing. I was no Joseph. I could not tell a true dream."

"I know." Joshua did know what the old man meant. He wished that he wouldn't couch it in such Biblical terms. Everything had to come from the Bible. His own visions had seemed real—in certain ones he had verified certain facts. But still, he could not, *would* not say they were "true."

"Tell me of the last one," his father said, leaning forward again, "the first one and the last one."

Joshua told his father about the early pogrom. His father nodded his head but kept silent as Joshua struggled with the words. He told him of the machine-gunning in the ravine. When Joshua finished speaking, his father sat back onto the couch to think. He closed his eyes and tipped his head forward onto his steepled fingers. A gesture which had not changed in ten years. Except for the exceptional thinness of the fingers and the liver spots on his hands. His father did not speak for many moments. This also had not changed. Joshua remembered having to tiptoe around the house while his father thought with his eyes closed. He didn't rest his eyes, like Uncle Morry, just thought with them closed.

"The first one I recognize," his father said, leaning forward. "It is the same as the first one I had. In Poland. The last, I did not see. It sounds like Babi Yar. In the Ukraine."

"Could be," Joshua said.

"And the others?" his father asked. "Are they sequential? Do the visions follow a pattern?"

"A pattern through time, yes, but there are gaps. Do *you* still have them?" Joshua asked.

The old man leaned back in the sofa. "Like David, I have been denied the way to God."

The simple statement brought chills to Joshua's neck. The way to God. He had not thought of God at all in any of this. Jews, yes, he had been forced to think of Jews, but not of God. He had not thought seriously of God since—he did not know how long. The God of the Old Testament. The Old Testament—his father would have gone through the ceiling if he'd heard him say that. The Holy Scriptures! They were not Testaments—and an old implies a new, something his father would never accept. That, and "B.C." "B.C.E." was all right—before the common era. But not "B.C." The old man had his little ways.

The Old Testament God. The God of Vengeance. Was he suffering the Wrath of God? Bruce Silverstein in Hebrew class used to mock: there is no God and Jesus is his son, there is no God and Mohammed is his prophet. If there was no God, how could there be a Wrath of God?

Benjamin huddled into himself and wept quietly. The way to God. Denied the way to God. This was enough to make his father cry. Joshua felt the distance between himself and his father as if it were a solid object. A wall. His father had sought the way to God ever since Joshua could remember. And he had been denied. While Joshua, the apostate, had been rewarded. What kind of God was it that would do that to his followers?

Joshua didn't know how to react to his father's tears. He wanted to console the old man, but knew the resentment that that would arouse.

"In 1916," the old man said, without raising his head, "in a vision of awful clarity, I was given the name of the little Austrian." Hitler—his father never called him anything but "the little Austrian."

"What?"

"I did nothing about it. At the end of the vision, I was told exactly what to do—where to find him during the Great War, and how to kill him. But I did nothing."

"You were only thirteen at the time," Joshua said.

"It was my first vision of the future, of an atrocity that could be *prevented*, and I did nothing about it. Thirteen was old enough." He stared at the ground. "Old enough. Thirteen is old enough to be a man. And then later, the chance was gone. The little Austrian lived—and six million Jews died."

"You couldn't have done anything," Joshua said.

Benjamin looked up at Joshua. "Yes, I *could* have! I could have changed *everything*."

Everything. Changed everything. The words reverberated in Joshua's head. *Everything*. He had seen—and done nothing.

"*Did* you ever change the future?" he asked his father bluntly, the words forcing themselves out almost of their own accord.

"Ah," the old man replied, raising his finger stiffly to make his point, "the import sinks in." This was the same gesture he had seen his father use in making a thousand points. The Talmudic finger.

"Yes," Joshua said. Getting information from his father was a tiresome, trying thing. "The import sinks in! *Did* you?" His father nodded. "How do you know it worked?"

"You never heard of the Fairfax Massacre—1958? And why not? Because *I* prevented it. I took the blueprint that God gave me, and I prevented it. Fairfax Massacre, Bronx Butchery of 1977, Tel Aviv Crater, the Rio River of Blood—none of them took place. Because *I* acted." The effort of the speech caused Benjamin to sag back in the sofa, looking tired.

"How did you do it?"

"God showed me a way." Now Joshua was uneasy. God showed him a way. Of course. If he were not himself having the visions, he would suspect that his father was crazy. He would *know* it. Maybe they *both* were crazy.

"You've been seeing into the future since 1916?"

"Yes, since 1916, when I could have done so much. So much."

Benjamin said he couldn't speak anymore. He was obviously worn out. Joshua helped him back to his car, rediscovering his father's frailness. Harlow went unbidden to the old man and kissed him goodbye. Kevin remained in the house, watching a re-run of "Three's Company" on television.

Standing naked in the bathroom with the light and fan on, Joshua brushed his teeth. He was trying to figure out what his visions meant. Before, they had just *been*, but now he wondered if there was some meaning to them, some purpose behind them. And what had his father told him—if he had told him anything? The old man was so oblique. All he knew for certain was that he had visions and his father had them.

Socorro said something from the bedroom. Joshua stuck his head around the corner. "What?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Socorro said. She was reading another Harlequin Romance, leaning against a pillow propped against the headboard of the bed. Her summer nightgown had slipped high up her legs. Her right leg was bent. The shadows beneath and between the legs, as always, beckoned. Promised. Her breasts flattened comfortably in the shiny blue material.

Joshua removed the toothbrush and said, "I'll make you talk with your mouth full."

"Ain't never *that* full, white boy!"

Joshua returned the toothbrush to the cabinet and rinsed his mouth.

Socorro had not moved. She didn't have to move. The blue nightgown rested lightly on her browned legs. Joshua slid onto the bed.

"My father says he sees into the future. God is giving him orders and he's changing the future. Sort of."

"You didn't put on your pajamas," Socorro noticed.

"Wasted effort."

"Kevin's still up."

Sometimes kids were more trouble than—no, that was not really true. But there *were* times they should be asleep. He walked to the hallway. "Lights out!" he yelled into the hall before closing the door. Back to the bed.

"He's getting pretty old," Socorro said as Joshua returned to her. It took him a second to realize that she was talking about his father.

"He's talking about the same kind of visions I have. He says they're from God. And mine are getting closer and closer to the present."

"You've got to get up early tomorrow, so if you want to, now's the time." Her fingers walked down his stomach. Joshua snapped off the light and rolled to meet her.

At 2:26 in the morning, Joshua awoke to a startling revelation, a startling remembrance.

"Like David," he remembered his father saying. "Like David, I have been denied the way to God." Did that mean that the visions had deserted Benjamin? Joshua got out of bed without disturbing Socorro, who slept like the dead—put on his pajama bottoms from the closet, and walked around the quiet house.

The nightlight from the boys' room was enough to illuminate the hallway. In the kitchen, he flipped on the overhead light. His eyes stung from the brightness. No cockroaches—the exterminator must have gotten them all the last time. Joshua sat at the kitchen table after taking a drink of water from the sink to wash away the stale taste of Socorro. The clock over the sink told him the time was 2:31.

Things became warm. The dull brown-and-grey pattern on the table cloth changed to a flat white of building bricks. Joshua stood on the balcony of an enormous block-wall dormitory building. The air was heavy and hot. August, he thought, or September. Pennants and flags blew in the distance. People in police and army uniforms spread out below him, but aside from the faint snapping of the flags, an extraordinary quiet damped everything.

Joshua noticed the semi-automatic weapon as a hooded figure darted out from behind a curtain. A dull, muffled popping was followed by a series of screams, more weapons fire, and the crashes of breaking glass. An athlete's tote-all flew onto the balcony and landed at Joshua's feet. Joshua looked into the apartment to discover what he knew he would find: the littered remains of bleeding and broken bodies.

1972, he realized. Munich, the Olympics.

With scarcely a break for him to recoup his strength, Joshua was pushed into a vision of three machine-gun-wielding Japanese firing on a helpless airport crowd.

A bus bomb in Israel, a synagogue bombing in Vienna.

Undisturbed by Socorro, Joshua suffered through to the end of these visions. The short, lucid interval between made them more and more terrible. Another began. They were coming more closely together, approaching the present day quickly. Maybe when they arrived, they would stop. His father's had not, had gone on into the future, but he could hope.

At 4:04, Joshua noticed the clock again. His pajama bottoms were soaked in sweat. He could barely move. He forced himself to go to the drawer under the telephone, took out a pencil and paper, and returned to the table. He wrote two pages of notes before putting his head on the table.

He awoke once around noon in his bed and was fed a bowl of chicken soup by Socorro. He couldn't speak, and fell asleep again at once. Around four in the afternoon, Socorro tapped on his shoulder. "Your father's here," she said.

Joshua opened his eyes. Socorro kissed him on the forehead. "My father?" Joshua said. "How did I get here?"

"I put you to bed. Called you in sick at work, and then called your father again. I'm scared, Josh."

"Just a couple of minutes," Joshua said. He was feeling better, more awake at least. He threw back the blanket and sat up to get out of the bed. Dizziness drove him back. The tops and bottoms of his pajamas didn't match. His father was here. Maybe he *was*, in fact, going crazy. Already *gone.*

Joshua heard Benjamin speaking to Socorro in the hallway outside the bedroom. They were speaking—that was something.

His father said, "Certainly it's a mental thing. It is all in his head."

Socorro said something that Joshua couldn't hear.

"Just as mine were in my head," his father continued. "There are no physical manifestations. That doesn't mean he's insane. Jeremiah wasn't insane."

Joshua expected Socorro to ask, "Jeremiah who?" Instead she said, "Not a breakdown then?"

"No, not a breakdown. It might get worse, too. The past is one thing. There's nothing we can do about the past, but when it turns to the *future* . . ."

The door opened and Socorro with her back turned said, "I think I understand." She faced Joshua and winked a smile. "He's awake."

The old man took his time in moving the chair from the vanity table and placing it next to the bed. Joshua felt more feeble than his father looked.

"Giving up your religion is no easy thing," his father said as he inched his way into the chair.

"Do you want a pillow for that?" Joshua asked. His father waved the suggestion away. Joshua sat awkwardly up on his arms and answered his father's comment. "I gave up my belief in God. The religion part seemed to follow logically."

Joshua recognized the patronizing flicker of smile on his father's lips. Yes, it said, I know it all. You might find out about it—you *are*, in fact. These visions are the proof.

"Your wife called me again. We have things to discuss." Benjamin held the notes which Joshua had made during the night. Running his finger down the pages he said, "Of these I saw only the Austrian bomb. And I would not travel to Austria. Jews who remain in Austria after the little

Austrian . . ." Joshua had agreed with his father on this point, until he heard one of the few remaining Viennese Jews explain that he remained because to leave would have been a final victory for Hitler.

"Are you still having them?"

"Like David—"

"In plain English."

"No." His father looked away, fidgeted with his beard. "No. Not for two years this month. I had . . . I refused to . . ."

"Two years? Mine started two years ago this month." Joshua wondered if his father's ability, gift or curse, had been passed to him. And if so, *why?* Was his father too old to carry on? Would it go to Kevin next, or Harlow—or both?

Joshua was still in bed recovering when the next vision vaulted him into the future.

It was the near-future too, not more than a year or two away. As Joshua watched, in his vision, people began to die, die strange, horrible deaths. People all over the nation, hundreds of thousands of them. But not every person. Only *certain* people, people with the "Jew gene." Genocide had been genetically engineered, using a retrovirus which only became viable if a certain gene had a certain chromosome with certain characteristics. Joshua didn't know enough about genetics to understand how it worked. It didn't matter.

At the end of the vision, he saw a smiling man in a white lab coat. On the lab coat was a nametag which said in German, "Hauss, Assistant Geneticist, State Research & Development, Cologne." After that, a vision of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles during a concert featuring Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, on September the fourth. In the audience on an aisle seat in the high balcony sat Hauss. Behind him sat Joshua. While Te Kanawa sang "Glitter and Be Gay," Joshua—

Joshua called his father and told him of the vision.

"This," his father said over the telephone, "is a true vision."

"So?"

"Fulfill God's will. Go to Los Angeles."

There must be another way, Joshua thought. There *must* be. What kind of God would demand a blood sacrifice? That was easy. An Old Testament God! The same God he had turned away from when he was old enough to think for himself. The God of Vengeance. The God of Wrath.

There must be a way to reach this Hauss, to talk to him, to change his mind, to change his life. "There must be," he told his father.

"There *is* no other way. You do it *God's* way, or the vision comes true. I know! Don't you think I tried to kill the little Austrian after 1933? After Czechoslovakia? After Kristallnacht? *I know.*"

"I can wait," Joshua protested, knowing that September was too close to allow him.

"You *cannot* wait. You have been given the man. You have been given the place. You have been given the *time.* This man might be minutes away from his discovery; even if he doesn't create this virus himself, he may be on the verge of publishing something which will enable somebody *else* to create it. Or maybe he figures it out while listening to this woman sing. Maybe that's when he gets the idea." There was no arguing with his father's remorseless logic.

"Thou shalt not kill," Joshua muttered wanly. A feeble argument.

"Ah, but remember Saul, and what happened when *he* disobeyed the Lord." Another Biblical reference. Surely his father could come up with more and more of them, burying his feeble objections. And, anyway, it was *true.* The Old Testament God did not relish being crossed. The Old Testament God. Magnified and Sanctified be the Great Name. Amen! Magnified and Exalted. Even the *Arabs* said that Allah was Merciful. A strange sort of mercy.

With dread and foreboding, Joshua made his plans to go to Los Angeles.

Harlow stood at the front door, stamping his feet with a three-year-old's anger. He was whining, "Don't go!" Socorro stood behind him with her hands on his tiny shoulders. It was, Joshua thought, as if Socorro was expressing her own feelings *through* the boy. She didn't want Joshua to go, either. She didn't understand, and had told him so. How *could* she understand what Joshua *himself* could not understand? I'm going to do the bidding of a God that doesn't exist. I'm going to murder someone I've never met, because God told me to. No, he could not explain matters to her. It was better to say nothing. So he had told her nothing of his plans. He just withdrew the money from the savings account—the money they had both saved for a trip to Lake Tahoe.

He had always thought that in a conflict between love and duty, he would choose love. Every time. But this was *different.*

As for Harlow, there was no point in trying to reason with him. He kissed the boy first, then Socorro, and left. Kevin waved from the front yard and went back to spraying the garden hose on the driveway.

So quickly, they were left behind, and he was alone.

Joshua arrived in Los Angeles on the morning of the third. His travel agent had arranged for the flight and the hotel, but not for the concert ticket. He wanted no record of that. In the *Times,* he read about the Symposium on Human Genetics at U.C.L.A. That must be why Hauss was in the country. He took a cab to the Music Center, and bought a ticket at the box office, pointing out the seat he wanted on the chart, and paying cash. He stopped on the way back at a hardware store and bought twenty feet of 20 mil wire. He was surprised when he discovered how expensive the concert ticket was. Dame Kiri received as much as many rock stars. The wire, though, was cheap.

The Fourth of September was pure hell. Joshua could not concentrate on anything. The weather was hot and smoggy. He couldn't see forty yards out his hotel window. He refused to go outside into air that was so foul—just a first stage smog alert, he heard, and then found out that there were two stages beyond that one that were worse. How could people live like this? All he could do was wait in the air-conditioned hotel. He went down to one of the shops under the hotel and bought a pair of leather gloves. Waiting for fifteen hours was too much. He tested the strength of the wire over and over again. The gloves would save him from cutting his hands. This wasn't the method *he* would have selected to kill somebody, but it was in the vision—and who was he to argue with God? He hated waiting. Especially as he knew what was at the end of the wait. Hauss might well deserve to die for the hundreds of thousands of deaths he would otherwise cause, but Joshua didn't want to be the instrument of his death. Joshua didn't even believe in the death penalty, had marched in protest of the Vietnam war. He was even squeamish about stepping on bugs. But here he was, nevertheless, impatiently waiting for a concert to begin so that he could kill someone he didn't even know.

Finally, the time dragged around. Joshua took another cab to the Music Center. He walked up the outdoor steps like a man going to his own execution. The bright glare of the lights in the water fountains didn't brighten his mood. The laughter of people meeting on the stairs and hugging and chatting excitedly in the foyer—he felt none of it. He bought a program. As he climbed the stairs under the fabulous chandeliers, he looked at the infinity of reflections in the mirrors lining the stairs—dozens of grim-faced Joshua Ben Yosevs. In the coat pocket of each one was an instrument of death.

The Bernstein "Glitter And Be Gay" was scheduled third, after a song by Peter Warlock and another by Samuel Barber.

Joshua scanned the crowd until he spotted Hauss. Hauss was with a woman, a blonde wearing an expensive fur. They came and sat on the aisle in the row in front of Joshua. Just like in the vision. They chatted—the woman spoke with an English accent. They had a good deal of trouble trying to understand each other. Language-wise, anyway. The woman was very impressed that Hauss had spoken at U.C.L.A. the day before. Hauss seemed impressed with the woman. Just before the orchestra tuned up, he patted her knee in a fatherly fashion, and left his hand there when she didn't object.

The Warlock song—Joshua heard it in snatches. What kind of a name was Peter Warlock, anyway? The Barber was tranquil. The audience applauded both loudly. And then the "Glitter And Be Gay" began. Joshua reached into his pocket for the wire. He wrapped one end around his left glove. He slipped out two and a half feet of wire and then grabbed the remaining loop in his right hand. He tested the strength of the wire again.

Everybody was watching the singer. Even Hauss did not seem to notice as the wire went in front of his face.

And then Joshua jerked the wire tight. Through the wire, through the gloves, he felt the neck give, the skin cut.

There was a gurgle, abruptly cut off.

So quickly, so easily—it was over.

He got away without anyone following him, before anybody except the woman even knew that anything was wrong, and she had probably thought for the first few critical seconds after Hauss slumped over that he was having a heart attack. It had all happened so fast that Joshua had been gone before anyone could react. In the cab on the way back to the hotel, he felt relief spreading through his soul like a warm syrup, followed, surprisingly, by jubilation. He had *done* it, and it hadn't been so bad. In fact, it had been *easy*. Surprisingly easy.

He had done it!

When he arrived home, Joshua was relieved to find that Kevin was down the street playing with Jeremy and that Harlow was taking a nap. Joshua was unlocking the door when Socorro came to see who was there.

"How was your little trip?" Socorro asked coldly. She did not move out of the way. She was still pissed to the gills. As she had a right to be. But there was nothing Joshua could do about it. Later tonight, maybe, he could soften her. He would certainly need her help. This was by far the worst thing he had ever done. But he had done it. God, he had actually *done* it, without even trying to find another way. He should not have listened to his father. Something else would have worked. Wouldn't it? The neck giving, the skin cutting—Joshua could feel them still.

But now that it was over, now that he was safely home, the relief he'd felt immediately afterward was even greater. Relief at not getting caught, yes. But, he had to admit there was another relief also: relief at having been *able* to do the most vile thing. He'd done it, and he'd survived. Not a trace of the remorse he'd expected. Relief! He might be able to carry on these missions after all. The first had to be the worst.

When he didn't answer, she said, "Was it worth it?"

"I'll never know," he said flatly, the words coming out of their own volition. That was *true*, wasn't it? And just so, his relief crumbled. What was he doing, what was he becoming? He would have to try and stop.

His father had been able to stop: he'd been killing people for God for over fifty years, but then somehow he'd been able to stop. Maybe he could, as well.

The next day, with Socorro and the boys, Joshua returned to the house of his youth to speak to his father. He had not been home in over ten years. Socorro and the boys had never been here. The house looked small and dark. The trees in the yard had grown, and one, a peach, had died. The crack in the entryway tile had spread an inch or so.

In the living room, his father sat in his favorite chair. This chair was a replacement for one which Joshua remembered. The chair Joshua sat in was old. He remembered dropping a lit match in it when he was eight. If he turned over the cushion, he knew, the burned spot would be there, a scorched hole the size of a walnut and shaped like the big island of Hawaii.

"So?" his father asked. His mother had taken the others on a tour of the house.

"How did you *stop?*"

"Stop? The visions? I see." He steepled his fingers and closed his eyes.

Joshua waited for his father to continue. He looked over the knickknacks in the room. None had changed, not even in location. This room was a fossil of the past, a museum. Just as his father was himself a fossil of faith gone by. The past had been so comfortable and safe, so calm and innocent. His problems were with and in the future.

"God," his father finally said, "when He discovers a good trick, He uses it over and over."

If this comment was meant to illuminate, it failed. "And?" Joshua prodded.

"Why did you do this thing?" Benjamin asked.

This thing. This *thing?* "What thing?" Joshua asked.

"Let us not play word games. Why did you frustrate this vision?"

"Frustrate this vision?" Talk about playing word games. Let's call a spade a spade here. "You mean, why did I fly to Los Angeles and garrote a total stranger?"

His father seemed shocked by the bluntness of the question. Maybe he hadn't really been prepared for not playing word games.

"No need to shout," he replied. "Your wife might hear. But yes, why did you . . . kill this stranger?"

"Because *you* told me I must," Joshua said. Obey your father. He knew it was not true even as he spoke—he wanted to hurt the old man, blame him for what he himself had done.

"But *why?*" his father asked, nonplussed. "You could have sat on your hands and done nothing."

Why is he doing this to me? Joshua asked himself. *He's* the one who told me I couldn't afford to sit by and do nothing.

"Let me tell you," his father said. "You did it to protect your own children."

Without even having to think about it, Joshua knew that this was true. If not his children, then his *children's* children. Unto the fourth generation. His children's future. His *own* children, not just the Jews of the world.

His father continued, "You remember the story of Abraham and Isaac in the land of Moriah?"

More Biblical cant, Joshua thought. But what other explanation could there be? Insanity? "Yes, when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. So?"

The finger rose into the air, the point was about to be made. "It is well that you remember your boyhood lessons. *That* was a good trick."

There was nothing more his father would tell him, nothing about how to *stop*. Which meant that Joshua would have to continue. To find the strength to go on. Or the strength to stop without help. Where, he wondered, could he find the strength? In a belief in God? Did he believe in God *now*? Surely only God could make him do what he had done.

But did he *believe?*

Joshua's last vision came as he was about to take a shower. He reached for the shower handles and stopped before turning them.

"Are you *sure*, Sir?" a very young lieutenant asked. His voice was scared and shaky.

"Yes. Input your code and turn the key!" It was an older man; his back was turned toward Joshua, but he could see the General's stars on his shoulders. When the Lieutenant did nothing, the General said grimly, "This is a direct order from a superior officer."

The lieutenant chewed his lip as he typed his code into the launch computer. His face was pale.

"Bear up, Lt. Mollar."

"Yes, sir," Mollar replied. He was unable to turn the key.

"Let me help you."

"I'm sorry, General Yosevs, it's mated to my fingerprint. I'll be able to do it in a moment."

"Take your time, soldier. We can wait another thirty seconds."

The young lieutenant waited a moment longer, sweat beading his face. Then he turned the key.

Horrified, Joshua watched as mushroom clouds blossomed all over the world. Buildings melted. Cities crumbled. Forests blazed. People disappeared in flashes of light. Not only Jews, but *everyone*, the entire future itself. And, somehow, Joshua knew that this was not necessary, not a war, not a response to an attack, but something the General had decided to do on his own, for some insane reason of his own devising.

Joshua had clearly heard the General's name.

General Yosevs. "I'm sorry, General Yosevs, it's mated to my fingerprint."

Yosevs. I'm sorry, General Yosevs. Yosevs, the last name of Joshua's father, who was too old to be the general in the vision.

Naked, Joshua walked to the bedroom and dialed his father. He tried to think as the phone rang.

Yosevs was Joshua's own last name. But Joshua would never be a general.

"Hello," his father answered cheerfully.

Yosevs was the name of perhaps one hundred others in the country. Maybe fewer.

Joshua did not know what to say. He held the phone and listened as his father asked, "Yes, who is there, please?"

Yosevs was the last name of Harlow and Kevin, both of whom, *either* of whom would be the proper age at the proper time. Another of God's good tricks. Abraham asked to sacrifice his son.

"Which of my boys did you see?" Joshua managed to ask finally. To the silence which met his question he added, "In your last vision. Which of my boys did you see destroy the world?"

Still the silence from his father.

"Joshua, I am sorry," the old man said painfully. "It has come to you, too. This final dilemma. I am so sorry."

"Which one?" Joshua asked. His voice was strangled. *"Which one?"*

After a long pause, his father said, "I saw only *you*, Joshua. Only you. You were the only one I saw. Not your boys, neither of them. Just you, and the vision showed me it would be the end of everything if I didn't destroy you. I never understood how you could bring about the end of everything. Now I understand."

"The end of everything, and you didn't kill me?"

"I was not Abraham. I could not give up what he was asked to give up. I loved my son too much. Even though you had given up the faith, Joshua, you were still my son." Even though he had married Socorro and his father hadn't spoken to him in ten years, still he was his father's son.

Harlow and Kevin—they were both *his* sons.

"What can I *do*?"

"Trust in God. Trust in love." The two were mutually exclusive.

"Help me," Joshua begged.

"I can't," his father whispered.

Joshua put the telephone down on his bed. Yosevs was the last name of Kevin and Harlow, both of whom would be of the proper age at the proper time. Since his father had seen *Joshua* as the nexus, it *must* be either Kevin or Harlow. Either. Both.

Which? Joshua had no way of knowing. If the visions went to one of the boys, would *they* be the force that drove him insane? He could not know.

Better dead than insane.

Socorro came to check on Joshua after he had been in the shower for more than an hour.

"Another vision?" she asked from outside the door.

He didn't answer. He couldn't speak. The water ran off Joshua, not cleaning what could never be cleaned. It was appropriate that he was in the shower, anyway. Many a good Jew had died in the showers.

Gas.

Socorro helped him to dry, dress, and totter to bed.

"You know I love you and the boys," he said helplessly, from the bed.

Socorro turned off the light by the bed. "We'll talk about it in the morning. Now, go to sleep."

He slept.

When he woke, Kevin was standing at the foot of the bed. Harlow ran in and said, "Good morning, Dad," and, with his usual chirrup, bounced up onto the bed.

"Mom went to the doctor," Kevin said. "She'll be back for lunch, she said, so don't eat anything. She wants to go out."

"McDonald's!" Harlow added.

Joshua wondered which doctor she was arranging for him to see. A psychiatrist, no doubt, who wanted to talk to her first. A psychiatrist couldn't help him now.

Gas, he thought as he got dressed. Not Zyklon-B, like the Nazis had used in the camps. Carbon monoxide—they had used that, too, in early experiments.

"Come on, boys," he said when he was ready; his sons were watching television. It was the last week before Kevin had to go back to school, his last week of superheroes during the day.

"Where?" Harlow asked.

"The mall," Joshua said. "The toy store."

Kevin didn't want to miss the show, but the toy store was too much for him to resist. "What about Mom?" he asked.

"We'll be here when she gets back."

Yes, they would be there when she got back. Poor Socorro. Pity poor Socorro, finding them. Socorro, who was innocent of all this.

"Can I get a model rocket?" Kevin asked. He turned off the television.

"And a shopping cart? They were out of them before," Harlow said.

"We'll see," Joshua answered.

"That means 'no,' " Kevin said to Harlow.

Joshua closed the door into the garage. He didn't push the automatic door opener. "Get in and buckle up," he said. How many times had he said that? He got into the car and started the motor.

"You better open the door," Kevin said.

"In a minute." Joshua got out of the car and opened Harlow's door. He adjusted the car-seat belt, kissed Harlow on the cheek.

"You dumb-head," Harlow said affectionately.

He didn't know how long it would take. He could smell the supposedly odorless gas. Or maybe the car needed a tune-up. Probably did, hadn't been tuned-up in . . .

He got back into his seat.

"Dad?" Kevin called softly. He sounded sleepy.

Socorro didn't mind the rabbi talking over the boys. Joshua *might* have minded, but she wasn't even sure about that anymore. He had changed so much in the last few months.

The old man, Joshua's father, had arranged everything. If it had been left to Socorro, who was unable to do anything anymore, they would still be in the garage.

She didn't mind the rabbi talking. She listened to his words, the rolling murmur of them, but she didn't understand them, even when he spoke English. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. What could words do? What could anything do?

The old man, Joshua's father, sat next to Socorro, and next to him was his wife. They had grown grey together. To lose a son was their grief. But she had lost two sons. And a husband.

The old man held his prayer book so tightly his knuckles showed white. More words.

She didn't mind the rabbi and his words. What did he understand? What could he know? The music was strange, and he never mentioned death.

Life. All he talked about was life. Those who must go on, not those who have departed. Not those who have chosen to leave.

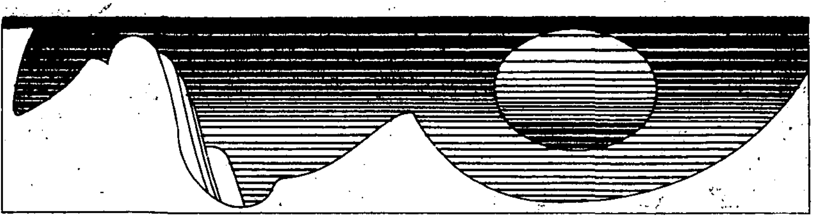
How could he have done such a thing? To his own sons? She knew very well that it had been no accident.

Life . . . she had never had the chance to tell Joshua . . .

She was almost glad she hadn't been able to tell him the news from the doctor, glad that he was safely dead. Two children were enough for him to murder. She would protect the third. Yes, for the good man he had once been, for the man she'd loved and married, not for the monster he'd become, she would protect their child, give him someone to carry his name down through the years. An heir.

She placed her hand on her belly.

A son. ●



NEXT ISSUE

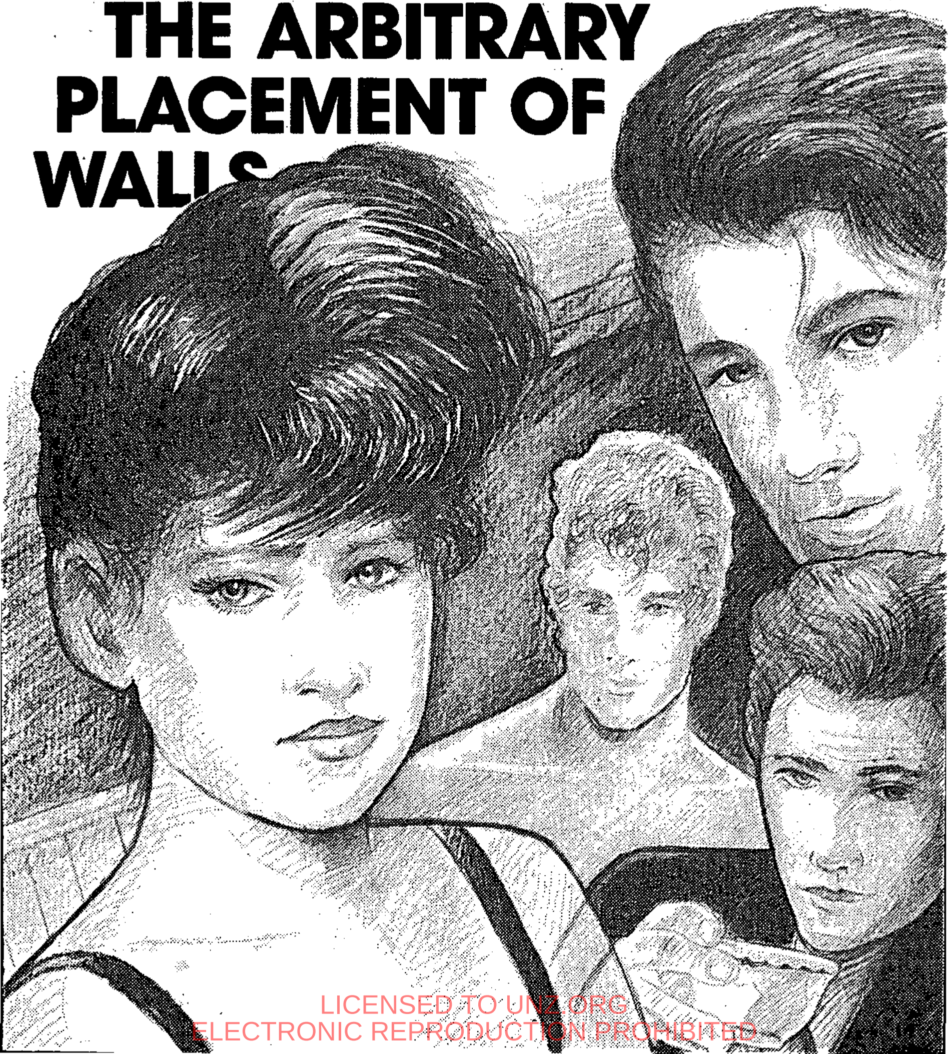
Michael Swanwick takes us to the moon next month for a big, powerful, and tautly suspenseful new novella, our May cover story, "Griffin's Egg." As readers of his *Vacuum Flowers* and *Stations of the Tide* can attest, Swanwick is one of the most ingenious and inventive hard science writers to enter the field in many years, and, in his hands, the Moon is a surprising place, a vast industrial park of bewildering scale and complexity, home to many top-secret high-tech experimental projects, and home also to an intricate Lunar society with lifeways and customs of its own. When a devastating atomic war breaks out back on Earth, however, the Lunar colonists soon discover that they are not far enough away from home to keep from being drawn into the conflict—and they find themselves facing a bizarre and unsuspected menace that could spell not only their own doom, but which could inalterably change the human race, or wipe it out forever.... This is a major new work by one of the hottest new stars in science fiction, and we're willing to bet that you'll be seeing this on next year's Hugo and Nebula ballots—don't miss it here!

ALSO IN MAY: multiple Hugo and Nebula-winner **Robert Silverberg** takes us on a harrowing journey through the trackless wilds of fifteenth-century Florida with a party of hard-bitten Conquistadors who are "Looking for the Fountain," and find some bizarre surprises instead; Nebula-winner **John Kessel** returns with a thoughtful study of how your place in society (and in your own life) might be a lot less secure than you *think* it is, in the provocative "Man"; **Steven Utley** takes an uncompromising look at some of the consequences of keeping your eyes turned too resolutely to the stars, in a hard-hitting little shocker called "Haiti" that is sure to be one of the year's most controversial stories; new writer **Maggie Flinn** makes a sprightly *IAsfm* debut with some advice on "Fifty More Ways to Improve Your Orgasm"; **Andrew Weiner** takes us Out To The Ball Game, with some curious aliens in tow, in the wry and lively story of a red-hot "Streak"; and new writer **Paul Hellweg** makes a powerful *IAsfm* debut with the vivid and disturbing story of "The Coke Boy." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our May issue on sale on your newsstands on March 31, 1992.

Martha Soukup has published stories in *IAsfm*, *F&SF*, *Amazing*, *Aboriginal SF*, and a number of anthologies. In 1988 she was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer and she has served as secretary of the Science Fiction Writers of America. "The Arbitrary Placement of Walls" is her second story for *IAsfm*.

by Martha Soukup

THE ARBITRARY PLACEMENT OF WALLS



art: Randie Wasserman

The trip to the kitchen like this:

Stand up from the folding chair six feet to the left of the far corner of the living room. Wide circle around the red armchair. The television is on. It makes a lot of noise. Basketball. Laura doesn't know anything about basketball; the confusion of the game comforts her a little.

Crossing the living-room floor in four big steps. A wide semicircle, to avoid the coffee table. She replaced the coffee table a year ago, but it didn't make any difference. She'd known it wouldn't.

Up the hall: left side, left side, right side, left side, right side, right side, right side, left side. A whispering at the fourth step. It can't be helped.

Dining room best ignored. Past the back bedroom, which is best ignored too: more whispers, many whispers; she tightens her inner ears to make a roar to drown them out. Finally into the kitchen. The thin blue line on the linoleum around the stove is one of the first she painted. There used also to be ribbons, ropes, strings around corners and chairs and places, different colors, color-coded. She's taken them down. Sometimes she can't keep intruders out of the apartment, and anyway she knows where all the ghosts are now. She steps around the line to the refrigerator. Takes a Pepsi and pops it open. She likes Coke. So did Eric.

She looks at the line around the stove and wonders how much acetone it would take to remove it. Maybe she could just paint lines around the refrigerator, the microwave stand, the kitchen table. Make it look like a Statement.

Thinking about Statements she missteps her way past the stove, stepping on the line. Blue ghosts. Donald memories. Donald frying bacon, naked, dancing away from the sizzles. She remembers yelling at him not to be an idiot, laughing at him. She has long since forgotten exactly what she said. Donald is always there to say what he said.

"It takes a real man to brave elemental fire for his woman," Donald says. Pauses, listening. Dusting of bright blond hair down his belly. "You think I'm afraid of a little bit of grease?"

"You should be, jerk," Laura says into the unresponsive air. "I only wish you'd cauterized your favorite parts." But she can't make herself sound as hostile as she wants.

"Yes I'm crazy and I love you too," Donald says. Suddenly—her memory times it perfectly—he yelps, clutches his buttock, leaps. "My god, I'm hit!" Pause. He laughs. Turns down the burner. "That's right. Kiss it and make it better—" He's collapsing in laughter. Kissing.

The Pepsi jerks in her hand, spraying Laura with sticky cold cola. She's squeezed a dented waistline around its middle. She breaks away from the blue Donald zone, wiping her hand jerkily on her jeans.

Back down the hall: right, left, left, left, right, left, right, right.

She sits two-thirds from the left side of the sofa and stares at the television screen, sipping too-sweet Pepsi. Michael Jordan leaps and spins. She tries to pay attention to the announcers, pick up the subtleties of the game. Donald taught her football, Frank taught her hockey, she taught *Eric* baseball. Basketball's new. Hers.

The doorbell rings. If it's a meter reader, he can wait for the Martins upstairs to answer. If it's not a meter reader, it's a Jehovah's Witness and child. She doesn't have visitors.

"Laura, I know you're in there. I saw you through the curtains."

Damn it. Life is complicated enough. She takes a wide arc to the front door, backtracking once as she nears Frank. She opens the apartment door to the lobby, crosses the narrow lobby space in two steps and peers through the front door peephole. If she squints down angled from the left she can barely see through it. Not Eric and three dozen roses. She sees her mother, two plastic grocery bags dragging down her arm.

What to do? Laura closes her eyes and opens the door.

"I'm not feeling very—" she begins, but her mother, a stout energetic woman in a perm Laura hasn't seen before, is already in the lobby. "You keep saying you'll come for dinner and you never do," her mother says. "So I have a nice chicken from the Jewel"—lifting one bag—"and a little something to drink with it"—lifting the other. "No arguing now. You let me in your kitchen and I'll have it in the oven in a flash. Then we can chat while it cooks."

Furious thought. "That's so much work, Mother. Let me take you out to a restaurant."

"Don't be ridiculous. I could do a chicken in my sleep, after forty years of it. What are you eating, that terrible microwave food? You could let your mother make you a real meal once a year besides Thanksgiving."

No way out. As she crosses the worn tiles of the lobby her mother's sturdy pink-sneakered foot squeals on the ceramic. In a flash Frank is solidly between them, jogging in place, his running shoes squeaking. "You look fine already, why jog so much?" she asked, four years ago.

Frank grins and gathers up a nonexistent love handle under his T-shirt. "When this body is perfect, your highness, then you'll really be in my power." He leans forward for a kiss, misses, stumbles, his new shoes squealing again. "See? Not irresistible yet. But soon—soon you'll be begging—and then *I'll* laugh—" and chortling, mock-sinister, he turns and runs out the door through her mother. Goodbye again, Frank.

"Laura?" She jumps. "I swear, you're always daydreaming, honey. Are we going in, or do we stand in the lobby all day?"

"I'm sorry, Mother. I've been feeling a little tired." A fumble with the key. Her stomach hollows as she sees her mother seeing the place, realizes what it looks like through orderly, domestic eyes. Christ. What a mess it is: old newspapers piled in apparent haphazard to block off bad places, traces of old chalk outlines lingering in worn carpet which hasn't been vacuumed in months, furniture in odd places—sofa in a corner, television on the mantlepiece, chairs angled erratically, the big red armchair near the center of the floor.

"Have you been sick? It looks like you haven't cleaned in ages. Is the whole place like this?"

A tally of bad places and the arbitrary placement of walls around them: living room, sunporch, big bedroom, little bedroom, study (the barest, least comfortable room, where she sleeps on a sprung mattress retrieved from someone's trash), the bathroom, and the lobby whose floor she hasn't mopped or even swept— "I'm afraid I've done better. We're busy at work. A lot of overtime." She grabs the red armchair and wrestles it to the nearest corner, its former corner, so mortified she barely sees the kaleidoscope of ghosts she plows through in the process. Back in place, Eric snores softly once, curled in red velvet, rubs his eyes, smiles sleepily up at her, murmurs: "Love you, Lauracakes. . . ."

She whirls away. "Really it's not usually like this at all—"

"I hope not, honey. You'll make yourself sick living like this." Her mother shoves her sleeves up her sturdy arms. "That's it, then. We're going to give this place its spring cleaning. I've got the whole evening free."

The whole evening? Dear God, Laura thinks. "I don't," she lies. "I have to go out and run some errands."

"Then don't let me stop you." Her mother is already gathering up newspapers. "You just leave me here and you'll see how much better this place looks when you get back."

"No, you can't—"

"Don't argue with your mother. What would your grandparents have said, if they knew you'd let their home get like this?" She is unstoppable. Laura can't leave her alone here.

So the whole evening it is, three solid hours caught helplessly in a domestic whirlwind, in the wake of a cheerful blur of activity. Her mother digs up brooms, vacuum cleaner, garbage bags, and Laura follows, unable to defend her fortresses of boxes, newspaper and carefully positioned furniture from being torn down and restructured into normal and deadly order. Her mother knows where everything used to be. She helped Laura move here from the dorm, years back, in the first place.

A helpless accomplice in the destruction of her wards, if Laura tries to move a chair back from a danger spot, she comes face to face with Donald Frank Eric and must retreat to hold bags for her mother's disposal of Pepsi cans, or to sweep furiously, staring at the floor where she can see only feet. Air fills with dust. Windows fling open. Nothing stops the juggernaut. It's a sickening feeling, like being dragged carelessly, at great speed, at the end of a tether across slick and dangerous ice. All she can do is pray for it to stop.

Suddenly she is taken by the shoulder and plunked into the sofa, a sweaty cold bottle shoved into her hand. "All done! That wasn't too bad, was it?" Her mother produces another bottle of wine cooler—Laura hasn't had alcohol since Eric—twisting the top off. Her mother sits in the red armchair and, though Laura sits six feet away, she can faintly see Eric sleepily stir and smile, sitting up until his curling lips are inches out of synch with her mother's. A swing band, her mother's cleaning music from the stereo, drowns out his loving murmurs. Her mother pours herself some wine cooler. The smell of roasting chicken drifts from the kitchen.

Laura takes a long pull from her bottle, gets hold of herself. The thin bite of alcohol unfamiliar on her tongue.

"I hope you like this brand, dear." She sips. "Nothing tastes better than a cold drink after a good day's cleaning."

Nothing hurts like old happiness, trapping her.

"You should be more careful with the things people leave you. Your grandparents willed you this building because they loved you, honey. You should treat it better."

"It's so big for one person," Laura says. "There's so much to do. If the Martins upstairs didn't do the yardwork, I don't know how I'd keep up."

"Then sell it," her mother says. "It would break your grandparents' hearts—but I suppose they're not around to know it."

"I can't." There are so many reasons, worn around the edges; the repairs it would need before she could put it on the market, the time it would take up, the Martins who were old friends of her grandparents and would never get such a low rent from any new landlord. What kind of person would put the Martins out on the street?

And no money at all to make the sort of repairs the place would need, even to cover the building's age with a bright coat of paint. Donald's investments saw to that; eternally, back in the study, he explains the columns of figures that prove his cousin's novelty factory will triple her money, give them enough for a honeymoon in Switzerland. He believed it. Any time she cares to look in the study she can see the excitement in his eyes. She saw it, unwillingly, an hour ago. She is still paying back the debts.

"Whatever you think is best," her mother says. Covering her mouth, she yawns with Eric. "Excuse me! All this exercise." She deftly rebuttons her sleeves. "I haven't moved so much furniture in years. I used to do it all the time, you know, whenever I was really upset about something. When we couldn't pay the bills, or when your father and I fought, or when you went away to college and I missed you so much, dear. I'd just roll up my sleeves and move the furniture all around. It really gets rid of the ghosts."

Laura starts. "Ghosts?"

"Oh, you know, all those stupid old memories. It does help to keep busy. Anyway, now we can sit and catch up."

Her mother sits, pleasantly waiting for news. Laura can't think of anything to say.

"So, are you dating anybody?"

"No," she says.

"Oh, honey. Now I know I'm not supposed to push for grandchildren, and I'd never do that. But don't you think you're working too hard? It couldn't hurt you to get out now and then. Aren't there any nice young men where you work?"

"They're all married."

"Oh, that's too bad. You know, I thought it was such a shame when that Eric moved to Wisconsin. He was such a sweet boy. Do you know he phoned me the other day?"

Oh Christ. Eric sits up sleepily through her mother and rubs his eyes. Her mother always liked him. Everybody liked him. He was good at that. After Donald and Frank, she hadn't been able to trust anyone, not until nice sweet Eric, polite to mothers, wonderful listener, gentle in bed. The bastard. She looks away from his smiling murmurs.

"He didn't sound like himself. He's in the hospital up there, poor boy."

"The hospital? Why?"

"He wouldn't say. He said it wasn't anything important, but you know he really didn't sound so good. Hasn't he called you? Maybe you should call him. I'll give you his number." She takes her little address book and a notepad from her purse and starts to copy a listing.

I'll never talk to him, Laura thinks. Then she thinks: AIDS, the bastard gave me AIDS and ran out, oh Jesus.

"Here you are, honey. I never did understand what happened between you two. If he's not very sick maybe this is a blessing, get you two together for a talk and who knows what could happen?"

The bastard would just lie to her again. "Mother—"

"Not that I'd ever pressure you, dear. You know I'd just like you kids to be friends."

"Mother—"

The oven timer sounds. Her mother stands.

"Mother." She jumps up and grabs her mother's arm. "Mother, I can't eat now." Her mother looks startled. "You understand. It's upsetting. Not knowing. I have to call the hospital, okay?"

"He said it wasn't anything important, honey."

He lied all the time. "Don't forget your purse. We'll do this again. Thank you for everything." She propels her mother to the apartment door, through the lobby, to the building door.

"Don't forget the hospital number—"

She grabs it and shoves it in her pocket. "Thank you. I'll call. Goodbye!" The door slams in her mother's concerned face. Laura retreats three steps and shoves the inner door shut, stepping around where the end table used to keep her from Donald. She miscalculates. His bags are packed and he glowers without looking at her. "Bastard!" she screams at him. She thrashes the empty air, makes herself stop.

She stands trembling in the wreckage of her protection, tidy rational apartment with nowhere to hide. Every chair and table, bit and piece has used her mother as its agent to find its way back to sinister order. Closing in on her.

She has survived everything else. She will survive.

She will leave the slip of paper wadded in her pocket.

The chicken slowly turns to carbon in the oven.

Ghosts.

Frank lifts weights in the back room, in the corner once marked out with brown chalk. "You're a self-involved jerk," she shouts at him. "I don't know what I ever saw in you!" He clamps another weight on the bar and grins at her. "You don't think I can lift this? Ah, but you forget how you inspire me, oh beauteous one. Watch!"

"I don't *care!*" She throws her glass through him. It shatters against the wall. Frank doesn't stop grinning. The bar bends under the weights' mass as he lifts it over his head.

"What do I get for a reward?" he says, grunting the bar back down, reaching out—

On the floor against the coffee table, Donald hunches, knee-hugging, in rare tears, his only tears. His father's death. Weeping, bruise-eyed, he reaches up for comfort—

Eric is setting the dining-room table: it's roast goose, a sort of asparagus soufflé, German wine. She can almost taste it. Smiling, pleased with himself, he reaches out to pull her in to him—

The shower is horrible: her mother threw out the hose she rigged to the other side of the tub, shaking her head, telling Laura she really should call a plumber if she can't deal with shower pipes. Laura can't bathe without Donald Frank Eric swirling around her with the water. She sponges her armpits, washes her hair in the bathroom sink, not looking up to see who is shaving in the mirror—

She tries sleeping in her bed where it's been moved back. (Her mother threw out the mildewy mattress in the back room.) Donald makes love beside her. His lean torso moves slowly, sensually; sweat gleams along his smooth jaw; his broad hand reaches to stroke her hair. He whispers things she could barely hear the first time, can barely hear now. Nonsense.

She turns her back, squeezes her eyes shut. Still the indecipherable murmuring. Gets up and takes two sleeping pills, jams the pillow down hard over her ears. Can't shut out the murmurs. Even the bed seems to rock, slowly, sensually—

Sobbing with anger, she drags the massive bed across the floor. It takes five long minutes to move it, gouging four broad pale lines in the floor. Her shoulders ache. Shake.

The bed moved away from where Donald touched a girl who used to be Laura, she still can't sleep. The house murmurs with the hundred ghosts of three living men.

Slip of paper wadded in her pocket.

The workday seems infinite when she's in the office. She thinks she hears gossip behind her back. Nobody says more than hello except her supervisor, Bob, lingering too long at her desk. His smug flirting brings bile to the back of her throat; she clenches her jaw until he moves on to the next woman. She routes forms, stacks and stacks of forms, trying to lose herself in the mindlessness of it. The routine is abysmal, the whispering unbearable, and the day goes on forever; and then she has to go home.

To each infinite, unbearable night.

Finally she calls the number on the lined paper.

Eric is putting a big box of Godiva chocolates on the end table next to the telephone, bidding for her attention with another present. The phone rings twice on the other end.

"Yes, could you tell me about your patient Eric Kennelly?"

"I can connect you."

Eric pulls away the chocolate box and points coyly to his lips.

"No, I don't want to talk to him. I just want to know how he's doing. Could you tell me what he's being treated for?". She knows it's not AIDS—Eric was too clever, too controlled to forget any precautions—but she tells herself she has to be sure. It's only sensible.

"I'm afraid that's not hospital policy, ma'am. I can connect you, if you like."

He unbuttons two buttons, pulls away the shirt from one shoulder and balances a chocolate on his pale skin.

"Ma'am?"

She hangs up.

An hour later she walks eight blocks to the car rental place and lays down her credit card.

He didn't even leave her for another woman. He'd just been killing time in Chicago until he could wangle an assistant professorship at UW. She was something to do in the meantime. Hindsight. "Do you know how many PhD's in history are working in personnel, or selling insurance, or pushing a broom? And this isn't some podunk college, either. This is my big break!" But he never asked if she'd move north with him. And was packed and gone before she could ask him.

It's only a couple of hours' drive to Madison, far too short. She has to stop at a gas station to find out where the hospital is. She circles it a couple of times before she pulls in and parks near the Visitors sign.

"It's probably not visiting hours," she says to the woman at the desk. "I can leave if it's the wrong time."

"No, there's half an hour left." The woman smiles. "Who are you here to see?"

"That's okay, I have his room number." 258. She can almost feel the number, burning into her hand from the wad of paper. Into the elevator, down the hall to the right nearly to the end; she faces the door. Hand on the knob. Opens it.

A wasted pale figure lies half-curled on a hospital bed. Tubes all over. It looks like nobody she's ever seen, barely like a human. The figure turns and opens Eric's gray-green eyes. "Laura. Well. What brings you by?"

The door gapes open behind her, air blowing through it, chilling her as if she's naked. She closes it carefully.

"I'll bet it's two weeks since I had a visitor." The voice is a rasping whisper, not Eric's soft tenor at all. He manages a lopsided sort of grin. "People get bored with watching a guy die. Can't blame them. Liver cancer's not a showbiz way to go."

She is silent.

"I knew you'd come eventually. You cut it close, though, hon."

She stares at him. She can't let herself feel sorry for the sweet and lying Eric who haunts her days and nights, so she mustn't make this miserable stick-figure look like any Eric at all.

Except the eyes. Hard not to look at the eyes.

"Laura? You going to say anything?" The stick-man swallows painfully. "I feel like I'm being visited by a ghost. You didn't go and beat me to the other side, did you?" He laughs briefly, coughs at greater length. "Sorry. Gallows humor. My psychiatrist tells me it's normal."

Just a stick-man, she tells herself. Something too big moves, like broken wings, inside her. All right! she thinks. Eric! Sick. Pitifully sick. But don't let him fool you again, don't let him—

"Laura?"

"Why did you call my mother? What do you want?"

The stick-man blinks Eric's eyes. "I don't know. Nothing. Whatever. It's so damn *boring*, dying. To see if you were still as uptight as you ever were. Amazing—you're even more uptight."

If she moves even an inch she'll be lost, he'll have won; in grief and sympathy and love she will do anything for him. She struggles to stand still, firm. So he'd be using her. Is that bad? Was he really just using her before?

He grins again, a parody of the smile that used to be his best feature. "It's something to do." Why did you move in with me if you just expected to leave in four months? she had asked him, desperate, as his car backed down the driveway. *It was something to do,* he said, and drove away.

"You never needed much reason," Laura says. She wonders if anaesthetics linger in hospital air. Her heart beats slow and her body feels dull.

Antiseptics must be stinging her eyes to tears. But she pushes down the crippled part inside her. Things die in hospitals.

The stick-man frowns. "Laura—"

"You knew how Donald and Frank hurt me, and you made it your little project to get me to trust you. Then you walked out." Something almost chokes her voice; she doesn't let it. "Kept things from being *boring*, I expect. I don't know. I've never been so *bored* I'd do that."

The stick-man coughs, starts to speak, coughs again. Lopsided grin: "Is that any way to talk to a dying man?"

"I don't give a shit what you do. You were the worst of the lot. I don't have a thing to say to you." She turns to leave, before the leaden anaesthetic feeling weights her feet in place, before the broken parts inside her weigh her down. While she can still move.

The stick-man rasps a sigh, presses his head back into his pillow. "Then why did you come all this way to see me?"

Laura stops without looking back. "No reason at all." Not good enough. She turns—his deep, gray-green eyes—and has to force her prepared words out: "Just a little friendly advice."

Deep breath: "Drop dead."

She closes the door behind her with perfect silence.

After her brilliant, cutting exit, what a shock to see Eric flush and laughing on the front stoop.

"You're dying," she tells him, and at the dining-room table, and in the red chair, and in the back bedroom, and at the kitchen sink. "Just die." Eric laughs and shows her how he can (sloppily) wash with one hand and dry with the other. All she can do is run again.

A week slides by.

Hard as she tries, she can't forget Eric dying in the hospital, too pitiful for lasting hate. To keep hate fresh she visits all the really bad ghosts. They don't hurt as much as the happy ones, the loving ones, but she's always spent less time with them.

In the back room with Donald: "If you had any sense you wouldn't have *encouraged* me to risk all my assets!" Mine too, she thought, but she was helpless against his hurt fury. "Flat broke and you think the wedding's still on? Give me the damn ring back and I'll at least have a thousand bucks to start a new life with." It isn't fair, but the ring clatters at his feet where she threw it at him. He picks it up without a word and stalks away; though she will wait for months for him to come to his senses, call her, apologize, he never does. Leaving her in debt, lonely, alone.

The bedroom with Frank: "I've thought about it," he says. "I'm going back to my wife." Wife? He never mentioned a wife. She would never have been stupid enough to get involved with a married man. It was his two jobs and his eternal exercise that kept his visits so erratic. "Of course I never told you I was married—we were going to get a divorce. You didn't need to know." He's pulling on his pants, not looking at her. His skin damp with sweat from their lovemaking. "But Sheila's pregnant now. I can't leave her." Too stunned to move, the hair on her thighs drying stiffly, she stared at him leaving.

And Eric. Over and over, Eric. "We've had fun, Laura, but this is a *job*. My future. Don't get emotional over this, okay? It was fun."

Hard to make these ghosts hurt as much as the happy ones. She wants the beautiful ghosts, for all she knows about them. These betrayers are strangers, strangers. She stares and stares at them.

The same feeling she's ever had on betrayal: numb. Just numb.

She doesn't miss the men who left. She misses ones she loves, and hates: the lovers who once stayed. If only they would go away now. Go away, leave her in peace.

The pain stays.

She thinks about what Eric said about beating him to the other side. She goes out the next Saturday, buys a tiny gun from a local pawn shop and contemplates it for a long hour, Frank sleeping at her elbow where the bed used to be two years ago. Contemplates it until the plastic pearl handle sticks warmly to her fingers. But death is a land of ghosts, and how is someone who can't manage the ghosts of life to manage all the ghosts of death?

Or maybe she's just a coward.

Unable to point it at her own head, she turns it on sleeping Frank.

"Bang," she says. Frank snores softly.

She crosses the room to where Donald is destroying the Venetian blind, futilely trying to rehang it. Aims. "Bang." The blind crashes to the floor and Donald, laughing, scoops it up. She walks into the living room and aims at the red armchair.

Eric isn't there.

Laura drops the gun. Somehow, it doesn't go off.

Somehow, Eric isn't there.

She approaches the chair slowly, afraid of things she can't guess at.

Just a chair. Empty.

She runs into the dining room, too fast to follow the side-to-side pattern, flashing past two Donalds and a Frank. Reaches the dining-room table.

Empty.

The back bedroom. The guest bed only ever shared with one person.

Empty.

The sink, where Donald or Frank never did dishes.

Empty.

Panicking, she runs outside to the front stoop. No roses wait for her there.

Back to the chair. She rips off the cushion, looking for she doesn't know what. Shakes the empty chair. Shakes it shakes it shakes it. Wrenches the chair back and forth with hysteric echoing clatters.

The phone rings. Laura jumps as though the gun were firing. She grips one velvet chair arm with each hand, presses her forehead into the back of the chair, breathes deeply. The phone keeps ringing. Trembling, she picks up the receiver.

"Ms. Hampton?" asks a strange voice. Not Eric. Not Eric.

"Yes?" Her voice is a squeak. She tries again. "Yes."

"I'm sorry to bother you. My name's Bill Chang. You don't know me. I was Eric Kennelly's roommate."

"Yes?"

"Um, well, your name is on this list he wanted me to call when—Ms. Hampton, I'm calling to tell you he passed away this afternoon."

"Yes."

"Um, I'm sorry to have to tell you this like this. I wish we could talk, but he's got all these cousins, and he really wanted me to make all these calls—"

"Yes."

"I know this is a terrible thing to hear from a stranger—".

"When did it happen?"

"What? Oh, I'm sorry. Less than an hour ago. I just talked to his parents. Do you want to know when the funeral is?"

"No. Thank you, Mr. Chang. Goodbye."

She hangs up the phone. The red chair is a little out of place. She replaces the cushion and pushes the chair gently to its proper bit of wall. Sits in it. So comfortable. So empty.

The little pawnshop gun lies at her foot. She picks it up and wipes cold sweat from its handle. It really is a nice little gun; it fits sweetly in her hand.

Sitting in the empty red chair with the sweet little gun feels better than she's felt in a year. Longer. She shuts her eyes and luxuriates in the wonder of having a third of her home back to herself. No more paper plates—she can use the sink. She can eat at the table. She can sleep on the guest bed. Reborn possibilities warm her, spread from her heart to tingle in every limb, flow through her hand to warm the sweet little gun.

Later she picks up the phone and dials a memorized number she's never phoned before.

"Mrs. Prescott?" she says pleasantly. "Hi. You don't know me. I'm an old friend of your husband Frank's. Could you tell him I've run into a few old things of his around my place I'd like him to come pick up? —Whenever's convenient. Thanks so much."

She stretches back in the red armchair, listening to Mrs. Prescott telling her when Frank can come over, right hand wrapped comfortably around warm plastic grip.

"Yes, that'll be a big help." Laura smiles. "I'm just trying to clear out the house."●

HUMAN COMPOSITION

It is carbon on which
is based all life
that we know, and yet
so little of us is carbon,
so much is water . . . I wish
on the glittering stars
that I might be ruled
by carbon and form
firm and easy attachments, or be
energetic as coal, or hard,
enduring and bright
as diamond, but instead
I am like water
always running always
standing still.

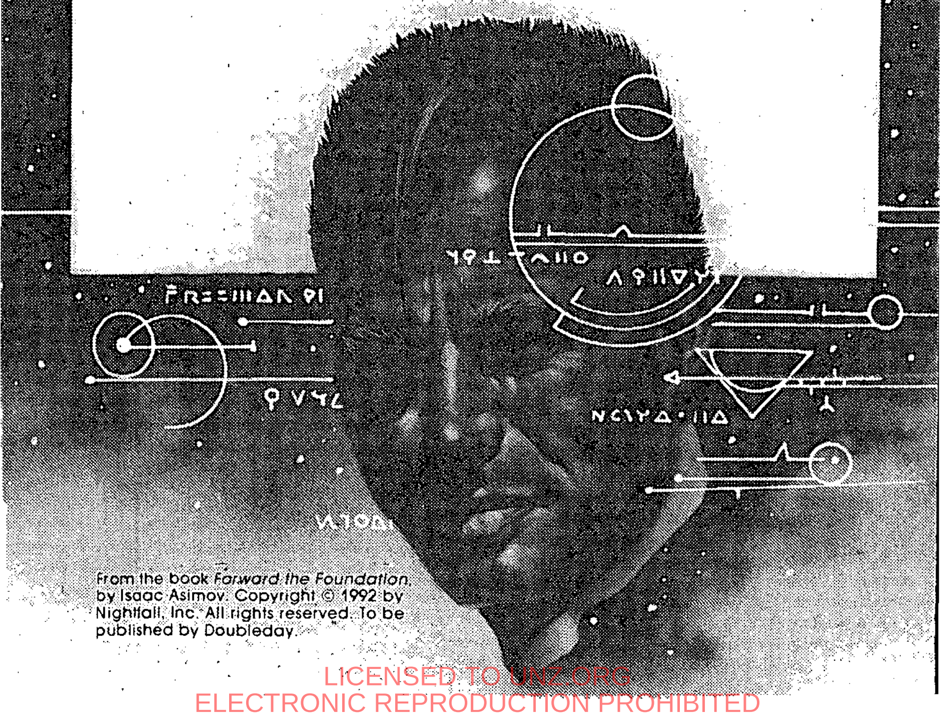
—David Lunde

CLEON THE EMPEROR

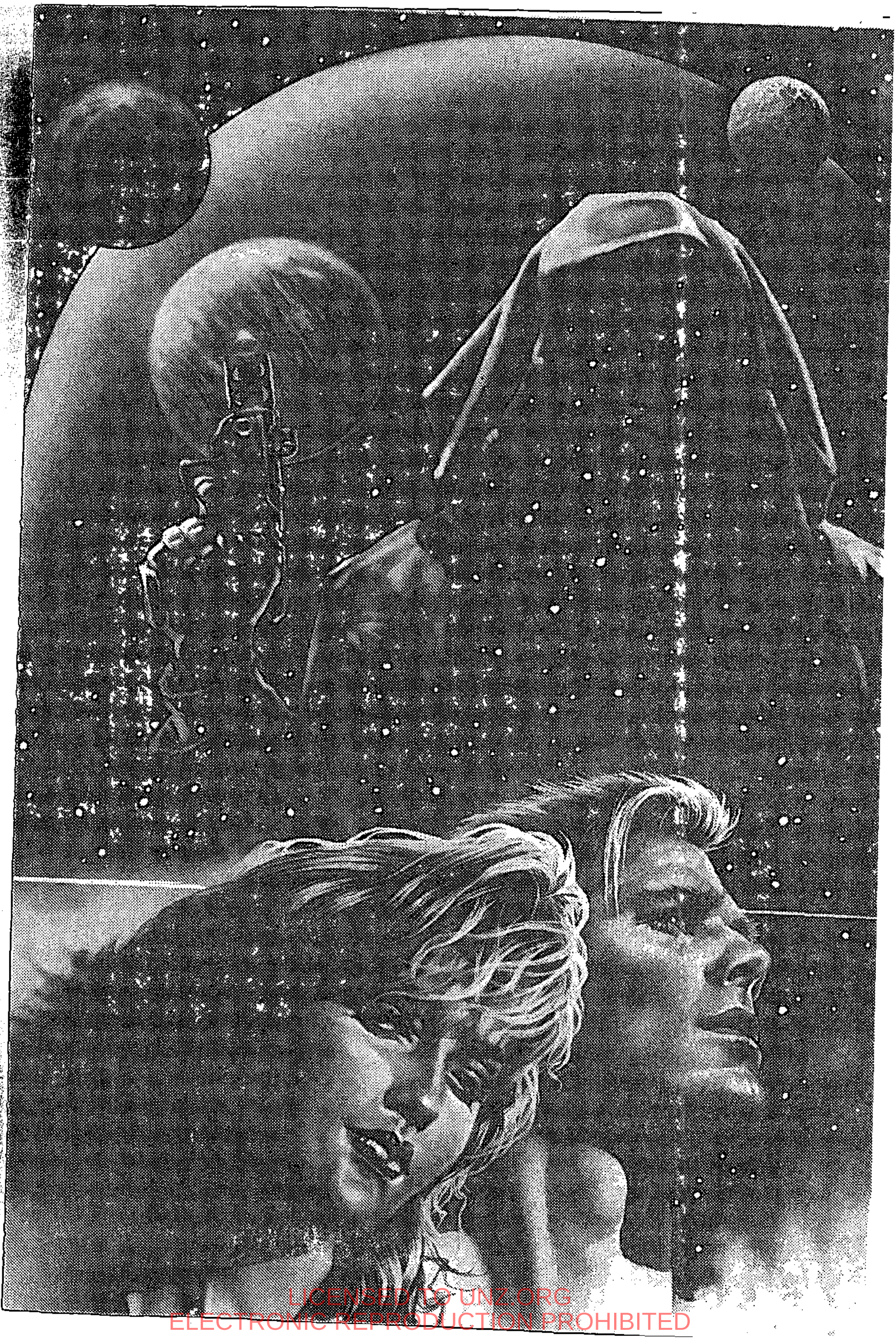
by Isaac Asimov

What better way to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary issue of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* than with the publication of the Master's thrilling new addition to the Foundation Universe? This story will be part of Dr. Asimov's new novel, *Forward the Foundation,* which will be published by Doubleday.

art: Gary Freeman



From the book *Forward the Foundation,* by Isaac Asimov. Copyright © 1992 by Nightfall, Inc. All rights reserved. To be published by Doubleday.



CLEON I— . . . Though he often received panegyrics for being the last Emperor under whom the First Galactic Empire was reasonably united and reasonably prosperous, the quarter-century reign of Cleon I was one of continuous decline. This cannot be viewed as his direct responsibility, for the Decline of Empire was based on political and economic factors too strong for anyone to deal with at the time. He was fortunate in his First Ministers—Eto Demerzel and, then, Hari Seldon, in whose development of Psychohistory the Emperor never lost faith. Cleon and Seldon, as the objects of the final Joranumite conspiracy, with its bizarre climax—

Encyclopedia Galactica

Mandell Gruber was a happy man. He seemed so to Hari Seldon, certainly. Seldon stopped his morning constitutional to watch him.

Gruber, perhaps in his late forties, a few years younger than Seldon, was a bit gnarled from his continuing work on the Imperial Palace grounds, but he had a cheerful, smoothly shaven face, topped by a pink skull, not much of which was hidden by his thin, sandy hair. He whistled softly to himself as he inspected the leaves of the bushes for any signs of insect infestation beyond the ordinary.

He was not the Chief Gardener, of course. The Chief Gardener of the Imperial Palace Grounds was a high functionary who had a palatial office in one of the buildings of the enormous Imperial complex, with an army of men and women under him. The chances are he did not step out onto the grounds oftener than once or twice a year.

Gruber was one of the army. His title, Seldon knew, was Gardener First-Class, and it had been well-earned, with nearly thirty years of faithful service.

Seldon called to him as he paused on the perfectly level crushed gravel walk. "Another marvelous day, Gruber."

Gruber looked up and his eyes twinkled. "Yes, indeed, First Minister, and it's sorry I am for those cooped-up indoors."

"You mean as I am about to be."

"There's not much about you, First Minister, for people to sorrow over, but if you're disappearing into those buildings on a day like this, it's a bit of sorrow that we fortunate few can feel for you."

"I thank you for your sympathy, Gruber, but you know we have forty billion Trantorians under the dome. Are you sorry for all of them?"

"Indeed, I am. I am grateful I am not of Trantorian extraction myself so that I could qualify as gardener. There be few of us on this world that work in the open, but here I be, one of the fortunate few."

"The weather isn't always this ideal."

"That is true. And I have been out here in the sluicing rains and the

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whistling winds. Still, as long as you dress fittingly . . . Look," and Gruber spread his arms open, wide as his smile, as if to embrace the vast expanse of the Palace grounds. "I have my friends, the trees and the lawns and all the animal life-forms to keep me company, and growth to encourage in geometric form, even in the winter. Have you ever *seen* the geometry of the grounds, First Minister?"

"I am looking at it right now, am I not?"

"I mean the plans spread out so you can really appreciate it all, and marvelous it is, too. It was planned by Tapper Savand, over three hundred years ago, and it has been little changed since. Tapper was a great horticulturist, the greatest—and he came from my planet."

"That was Anacreon, wasn't it?"

"Indeed. A far-off world near the edge of the galaxy, where there is still wilderness and life can be sweet. I came here when I was still an ear-wet lad, when the present Chief Gardener took power under the old Emperor. Of course, now they're talking of re-designing the grounds." Gruber sighed deeply and shook his head. "That would be a mistake. They are just right as they are now, properly proportioned, well-balanced, pleasing to the eye and spirit. But it is true that in history, the grounds have occasionally been re-designed. Emperors grow tired of the old, and are always seeking the new, as if new is somehow always better. Our present Emperor, may he live long, has been planning re-design with the Chief Gardener. At least that is the word that runs from gardener to gardener." This last he added quickly, as if abashed at spreading Palace gossip.

"It might not happen soon."

"I hope not, First Minister. Please, if you have the chance to take some time from all the heart-stopping work you must be after doing, study the design of the grounds. It is a rare beauty and, if I had my way, there should not be a leaf moved out of place, nor a flower, nor a rabbit, anywhere in all these hundreds of square kilometers."

Seldon smiled. "You are a dedicated man, Gruber. I would not be surprised if someday you were Chief Gardener."

"May Fate protect me from that. The Chief Gardener breathes no fresh air, sees no natural sights, and forgets all he has learned of nature. He lives there," Gruber pointed, scornfully, "and I think he no longer knows a bush from a stream unless one of his underlings leads him out and places his hand on one or dips it into the other."

For a moment, it seemed as though Gruber would expectorate his scorn, but he could not find any place on which he could bear to spit.

Seldon laughed quietly. "Gruber, it's good to talk to you. When I am overcome with the duties of the day, it is pleasant to take a few moments to listen to your philosophy of life."

"Ah, First Minister, it is no philosopher I am. My schooling was very sketchy."

"You don't need schooling to be a philosopher. Just an active mind and experience with life. Take care, Gruber. I have the temptation to see you promoted."

"If you but leave me as I am, First Minister, you will have my total gratitude."

Seldon was smiling as he passed on, but the smile faded as his mind turned once more to his current problems. Ten years as First Minister—and if Gruber knew how heartily sick Seldon was of his position, his sympathy would rise to enormous heights. Could Gruber grasp the fact that Seldon's progress in the techniques of Psychohistory showed promise of facing him with an unbearable dilemma?

2.

Seldon's thoughtful stroll across the grounds was the epitome of peace. It was hard to believe, here in the midst of the Emperor's immediate domain, that he was on a world that except for this area was totally enclosed by a dome. Here, in this spot, he might be on his home world of Helicon, or Gruber's world of Anacreon.

Of course, the sense of peace was an illusion. The grounds were guarded—thick with security.

Once, a thousand years ago, the Imperial Palace grounds, much less palatial, much less differentiated from a world only beginning to construct domes over individual regions, had been open to all citizens and the Emperor himself could walk along the paths, unguarded, nodding his head in greeting to his subjects.

No more. Now security was in place and no one from Trantor itself could possibly invade the grounds. That did not remove the danger, however, for that, when it came, came from discontented Imperial functionaries and from corrupt and suborned soldiers. It was *within* the grounds that the Emperor and his ministers were most in danger. What would have happened if, on that occasion, nearly ten years before, Seldon had not been accompanied by Dors Venabili?

It had been in his first year as First Minister and it was only natural, he supposed (after the fact), that there would be heart-burning over his unexpected choice for the post. Many others, far better qualified in training, in years of service, and, most of all, in their own eyes, could view the appointment with anger. They did not know of Psychohistory or of the importance the Emperor attached to it, and the easiest way to correct the situation was to corrupt one of the sworn protectors of the First Minister.

Venabili must have been more suspicious than Seldon himself was. Or else, with Demerzel's disappearance from the scene, her instructions to guard Seldon had been strengthened. The truth was that, for the first few years of his First Ministership, she was at his side more often than not.

And on the late afternoon of a warm, sunny day, Venabili noted the glint of the westering sun—a sun never seen under Trantor's dome—on the metal of a blaster.

"Down, Hari!" she cried suddenly, and her legs devoured the grass as she raced toward the sergeant.

"Give me that blaster, sergeant," she said tightly.

The would-be assassin, momentarily immobilized by the unexpected sight of a woman running toward him, now reacted quickly, raising the drawn blaster.

But she was already at him, her hand enclosing his right wrist in a steely grip and lifting his arm high. "Drop it," she said through clenched teeth.

The sergeant's face twisted as he attempted to yank loose his arm.

"Don't try, sergeant," said Venabili. "My knee is three inches from your groin, and, if you so much as blink, your genital equipment will be history. So just freeze. That's right. Okay, now open your hand. If you don't drop the blaster right *now* I will break your arm."

A gardener came running up with a rake. Venabili motioned him away. The blaster dropped.

Seldon had arrived. "I'll take over, Dors."

"You will *not*. Get in among those trees, and take the blaster with you. Others may be involved, and ready."

Venabili had not loosed her grip on the sergeant. She said, "Now, sergeant, I want the name of whoever it was who persuaded you to make an attempt on the First Minister's life, and the name of everyone else who is in this with you."

The sergeant was silent.

"Don't be foolish," said Venabili. "Speak!" She twisted his arm and he sunk to his knees. She put her shoe on his neck. "If you think silence becomes you, I can crush your larynx and you will be silent forever. And even before that I am going to damage you *badly*—I won't leave one bone unbroken. You had better talk."

The sergeant talked.

Later, Seldon had said to her, "How could you do that, Dors? I never believed you capable of such, such . . . *violence*."

Venabili said coolly, "I did not actually hurt him much, Hari. The threat was sufficient. In any case, your safety was paramount."

"You should have let me take care of him."

"Why? To salvage your masculine pride? You wouldn't have been fast enough, for one thing, not at fifty. Secondly, no matter what you would have succeeded in doing, you were a man and it would have been expected. I am a woman and women, in popular thought, are not considered as ferocious as men, and most, in general, do not have the strength to do what I did. The story will improve in the telling and everyone will be terrified of me. No one will dare to try to harm you for fear of me."

"For fear of you and for fear of execution. The sergeant and his cohorts are to be killed, you know."

At this, an anguished look clouded Dors's usually composed visage, as if she could not stand the thought of the traitorous sergeant being put to death even though he would have cut down her beloved Hari without a second thought.

"But," she exclaimed, "there is no need to execute the conspirators. Exile will do the job."

"No, it won't," said Seldon. "It's too late. Cleon will hear of nothing but executions. I can quote him, if you wish."

"You mean he's already made up his mind?"

"At once. I told him that exile or imprisonment would be all that was necessary, but he said, 'No.' He said, 'Every time I try to solve a problem by direct and forceful action, first Demerzel and then you talk of despotism and tyranny. But this is *my* palace. These are *my* grounds. These are *my* guards. My safety depends on the security of this place and the loyalty of my people. Do you think that any deviation from absolute loyalty can be met with anything but instant death? How else would you be safe? How else would I be safe?'

"I said there would have to be a trial. 'Of course,' he said, 'a short military trial, and I don't expect a single vote for anything but execution. I shall make that quite clear.' "

Venabili looked appalled. "You're taking this very quietly. Do you agree with the Emperor?"

Reluctantly, Seldon nodded. "I do."

"Because there was an attempt on *your* life. Have you abandoned principle for revenge?"

"Now, Dors. I'm not a vengeful person. However, it was not myself alone that was at risk, far less the Emperor—if there is anything that the recent history of the Empire shows us, it is that Emperors come and go. It is Psychohistory that must be protected. Undoubtedly, even if something happens to me, Psychohistory will someday be developed, but the Empire is falling fast, and we cannot wait, and only I have advanced far enough to obtain the necessary techniques in time."

"You should perhaps teach what you know to others, then?" said Venabili gravely.

"I'm doing so. Yugo Amaryl would be a reasonable successor, and I have gathered a group of technicians who will someday be useful, but —they won't be as—" he paused.

"They won't be as good as you, as wise, as capable? Really?"

"I happen to think so," said Seldon. "And I happen to be human. Psychohistory is mine and, if I can possibly manage it, I want the credit."

"Human," sighed Venabili, shaking her head, almost sadly.

The executions went through. No such purge had been seen in over a century. Two Senior Councillors met their deaths, five officials of lower ranks, four soldiers, including the hapless sergeant. Every guard who could not withstand the most rigorous investigation was relieved of duty and sent to detachments on the Outer Worlds.

Since then, there had been no whisper of disloyalty and so notorious had become the care with which the First Minister was guarded, to say nothing of the terrifying woman who watched over him, that it was no longer necessary for Dors to accompany him everywhere. Her invisible presence was an adequate shield, and the Emperor Cleon enjoyed nearly ten years of quiet, and of absolute security.

Now, however, Psychohistory was finally reaching the point where predictions of a sort could be made, and, as Seldon crossed the grounds in his passage from his office (First Minister) to his laboratory (Psychohistorian), he was uneasily aware of the likelihood that this era of peace might be coming to an end.

3.

Yet even so, Hari Seldon could not repress the surge of satisfaction that he felt as he entered his laboratory.

How things had changed.

It had begun eighteen years earlier with his own doodlings on his second-rate Heliconaian computer. It was then that the first hint of what was to become para-chaotic math came to him in cloudy fashion.

Then there were the years at Streeling University when he and Yugo Amaryl, working together, attempted to renormalize the equations, get rid of the inconvenient infinities, and find a way around the worst of the chaotic effects. They made very little progress indeed.

But now, after ten years as First Minister, he had a whole floor of the latest computers and a whole staff of people working on a large variety of problems.

Of necessity, none of his staff, except for Yugo and himself, of course, could really know much more than the immediate problem they were dealing with. Each of them worked with only a small ravine or outcropping on the gigantic mountain range of Psychohistory that only Seldon and Amaryl could see as a mountain range—and even they could see it only dimly, its peaks hidden in clouds, its slopes in mist.

Dors Venabili was right, of course. He would have to begin initiating his people into the entire mystery. The technique was getting well beyond what two men alone could handle. And Seldon was aging. Even if he could look forward to some additional decades, the years of his most fruitful breakthroughs were surely behind him.

Even Amaryl would be thirty-nine within a month and though that was still young, it was perhaps not overyoung for a mathematician, and he had been working on the problem almost as long as Seldon himself. His capacity for new and tangential thinking might be dwindling, too.

Amaryl had seen him enter and was now approaching. Seldon watched him fondly. Amaryl was as much a Dahlite as Seldon's foster-son, Raych, was, and yet Amaryl was not Dahlite at all. He lacked the mustache, he lacked the accent, he lacked, it would seem, any Dahlite consciousness. He had even been impervious to the lure of Jojo Joranum, who had appealed so thoroughly to the people of Dahl.

It was as though Amaryl recognized no sectional patriotism, no planetary patriotism, not even Imperial patriotism. He belonged, completely and entirely, to Psychohistory.

Seldon felt a twinge of insufficiency. He, himself, remained conscious of his first three decades on Helicon and there was no way he could keep from thinking of himself as a Heliconian. He wondered if that consciousness was not sure to betray him by causing him to skew his thinking about Psychohistory. Ideally, to use Psychohistory properly, one should be above sectors and worlds and deal only with humanity in the faceless abstract, and this was what Amaryl did.

And Seldon didn't, he admitted to himself, sighing silently.

Amaryl said, "We *are* making progress, Hari, I suppose."

"You suppose, Yugo? Merely suppose?"

"I don't want to jump into outer space without a suit." He said this quite seriously (he did not have much of a sense of humor, Seldon knew) and they moved into their private office. It was small, but it was also well-shielded.

Amaryl sat down and crossed his legs. He said, "Your latest scheme for getting around chaos may be working in part—at the cost of sharpness, of course."

"Of course. What we gain in the straightaway, we lose in the roundabouts. That's the way the universe works. We've just got to fool it somehow."

"We've fooled it a little bit. It's like looking through frosted glass."

"Better than the years we spent trying to look through lead."

Amaryl muttered something to himself, then said, "We can catch glimmers of light and dark."

"Explain!"

"I can't, but I have the Prime Radiant, which I've been working on like a— a—"

"Try lamec. That's an animal—a beast of burden—we have on Helicon. It doesn't exist on Trantor."

"If the lamec works hard, then that is what my work on the Prime Radiant has been like."

Amaryl pressed the security key pad on his desk, and a drawer unsealed and slid open noiselessly.

He took out a dark, opaque cylinder which Seldon scrutinized with interest. Seldon himself had worked out the Prime Radiant's circuitry, but Amaryl had put it together—a clever man with his hands was Amaryl.

The room darkened and equations and relationships shimmered in the air. Numbers spread out beneath them, hovering just above the desk surface, as if suspended by invisible marionette strings.

Seldon said, "Wonderful. Some day, if we live long enough, we'll have the Prime Radiant produce a river of mathematical symbolism that will chart past and future history. In it we can find currents and rivulets and work out ways of changing them in order to make them follow other currents and rivulets that we would prefer."

"Yes," said Amaryl dryly, "if we can manage to live with the knowledge that the actions we take, which we will mean for the best, may turn out to be for the worst."

"Believe me, Yugo, I never go to bed at night without that particular thought gnawing at me. Still, we haven't come to it yet. All we have is this—which, as you say, is no more than seeing light and dark fuzzily through frosted glass."

"True enough."

"And what is it you think you see, Yugo?" Seldon watched Amaryl closely, a little grimly. He was gaining weight, getting just a bit pudgy. He spent too much time bent over the computers (and now over the Prime Radiant), and not enough in physical activity. And, though he saw a woman now and then, Seldon knew, he had never married. A mistake! Even a workaholic is forced to take time off to satisfy a mate, to take care of the needs of the children.

Seldon thought of his own still-trim figure and of the manner in which Dors strove to make him keep it that way.

Amaryl said, "What do I see? The Empire is in trouble."

"The Empire is always in trouble."

"Yes, but it's more specific. There's a possibility that we may have trouble at the center."

"At Trantor?"

"I presume. Or at the Periphery. Either there will be a bad situation here, perhaps civil war, or the outlying provinces will begin to break away."

"Surely it doesn't take Psychohistory to point out these possibilities."

"The interesting thing is that there seems a mutual exclusivity. One or the other. The likelihood of both together is very small. Here! Look! It's your own mathematics. Observe!"

They bent over the Prime Radiant display for a long time.

Seldon said finally, "I fail to see *why* the two should be mutually exclusive."

"So do I, Hari, but where's the value of Psychohistory if it shows us only what we would see anyway? This is showing us something we *wouldn't* see. What it doesn't show us is, first, which alternative is better, and second, what to do to make the better come to pass and depress the possibility of the worse."

Seldon pursed his lips, then said slowly, "I can tell you which alternative is preferable. Let the Periphery go and keep Trantor."

"Really?"

"No question. We must keep Trantor stable if for no other reason than that we're here."

"Surely our own comfort isn't the decisive point."

"No, but Psychohistory is. What good will it do us to keep the Periphery intact, if conditions on Trantor force us to stop work on Psychohistory?

I don't say that we'll be killed, but we may be unable to work. The development of Psychohistory is on what our fate will depend. As for the Empire, if the Periphery secedes it will only begin a disintegration that may take a long time to reach the core."

"Even if you're right, Hari, what do we do to keep Trantor stable?"

"To begin with, we have to think about it."

A silence fell between them, and then Seldon said, "Thinking doesn't make me happy. What if the Empire is altogether on the wrong track, and has been for all its history? I think of that every time I talk to Gruber."

"Who's Gruber?"

"Mandell Gruber. A gardener."

"Oh. The one who came running up with the rake to rescue you at the time of the assassination attempt."

"Yes. I've always been grateful to him for that. He had only a rake against possibly other conspirators with blasters. That's loyalty. Anyhow, talking to him is like a breath of cool wind. I can't spend all my time talking to court officials and to Psychohistorians."

"Thank you."

"Come! You know what I mean. Gruber likes the open. He wants the wind and the rain and the biting cold and everything else that raw weather can bring to him. I miss it myself sometimes."

"I don't. I wouldn't care if I never went out there."

"You were brought up under the dome—but suppose the Empire consisted of simple unindustrialized worlds, living by herding and farming, with thin populations and empty spaces. Wouldn't we all be better off?"

"It sounds horrible to me."

"I found some spare time to check it as best I could. It seems to me it's a case of unstable equilibrium. A thinly populated world of the type I describe either grows moribund and impoverished, falling off into an uncultured near-animal level; or it industrializes. It is standing on a narrow point and falls over in either direction, and, as it happens, almost every world in the galaxy has fallen over into industrialization."

"Because that's better."

"Maybe. But it can't continue forever. We're watching the results of the over-toppling now. The Empire cannot exist for much longer because it has—it has overheated. I can't think of any other expression. What will follow we don't know. If, through Psychohistory, we manage to prevent the fall or, more likely, force a recovery after the fall, is that merely to insure another period of overheating? Is that the only future humanity has, to push the boulder, like Sisyphus, up to the top of a hill only in order to see it roll to the bottom again?"

"Who's Sisyphus?"

"A character in a primitive myth. Amaryl, you must do more reading."

Amaryl shrugged. "So I can learn about Sisyphus? Not important. Perhaps Psychohistory will show us a path to an entirely new society, one altogether different from anything we have seen, one that would be stable and desirable."

"I hope so," sighed Seldon. "I hope so, but there's no sign of it yet. For the near future, we will just have to labor to let the Periphery go. That will mark the beginning of the Fall of the Galactic Empire."

4.

"And so I said," said Hari Seldon. "That will mark the beginning of the Fall of the Galactic Empire. And so it will, Dors."

Dors listened, tight-lipped. She accepted Seldon's First Ministership as she accepted everything—calmly. Her only mission was to protect him and his Psychohistory, but that task, she well knew, was made harder by his position. The best security was to go unnoticed and as long as the sun of office shone down upon Seldon, not all the physical barriers in existence would be satisfactory, or sufficient.

The luxury in which they now lived; the careful shielding from spy-beams, as well as from physical interference; the advantages to her own historical research of being able to make use of nearly unlimited funds, did not satisfy her. She would gladly have exchanged it all for their old quarters at Streeling University. Or better yet, for a nameless apartment in a nameless sector where no one knew them.

"That's all very well, Hari dear," she said, "but it's not enough."

"What's not enough?"

"The information you're giving me. You say we might lose the Periphery. How? Why?"

Seldon smiled briefly. "How nice it would be to know, Dors, but Psychohistory is not yet at the stage where it could tell us."

"In your opinion, then. Is it the ambition of local, faraway governors to declare themselves independent?"

"That's a factor, certainly. It's happened in past history, as you know better than I, but never for long. Maybe this time, it will be permanent."

"Because the Empire is weaker?"

"Yes, because trade flows less freely than it once did, because communications are stiffer than they once were, because the governors in the Periphery are, in actual fact, closer to independence than they have ever been. If one of them arises with particular ambitions—"

"Can you tell which one it might be?"

"Not in the least. All we can force out of Psychohistory at this stage is the definite knowledge that *if* a governor of unusual ability and ambition arises, he would find conditions more suitable for his purposes than he would have in the past. It could be other things, too, some great natural disaster, or sudden civil war between two distant world coalitions. None of that can be precisely predicted as of now, but we can tell that anything of the sort that happens will have more serious consequences than it would have had a century ago."

"But if you don't know a little more precisely what will happen in the Periphery, how can you so guide actions as to make sure the Periphery goes, rather than Trantor?"

"By keeping a close eye on both and trying to stabilize Trantor and *not* trying to stabilize the Periphery. We can't expect Psychohistory to order events automatically without much greater knowledge of its workings, so we have to make use of constant manual controls, so to speak. In days to come, the technique will be refined and the need for manual control will decrease."

"But that," said Dors, "is in days to come. Right?"

"Right. And even that is only a hope."

"And just what kind of instabilities threaten Trantor, if we hang on to the Periphery?"

"The same possibliities—economic and social factors, natural disasters, ambitious rivalries among high officials. And something more. I have described the Empire to Yugo as being overheated—and Trantor is the most overheated portion of all. It seems to be breaking down. The infrastructure—water supply, heating, waste disposal, fuel lines, everything—seems to be having unusual problems, and that's something I've been turning my attention to more and more lately."

"What about the death of the Emperor?"

Seldon spread his hands. "That happens inevitably, but Cleon is in good health. He's only my age, which I wish was younger, but isn't too old. His two sons are totally inadequate for the succession but there will be enough claimants. More than enough to cause trouble and make his death distressing, but it might not prove a total catastrophe—in the historic sense."

"Let's say his assassination, then."

Seldon looked up nervously. "Don't say that. Even if we're shielded, don't use the word."

"Hari, don't be foolish. It's an eventuality that must be reckoned with. There was a time when the Joranumites might have taken power and, if they had, the Emperor, one way or another—"

"Probably not. He would have been more useful as a figurehead. And in any case, forget it. Joranum died last year in Nishaya, a rather pathetic figure."

"He had followers."

"Of course. Everyone has followers. Did you ever come across the Globalist party on my native world of Helicon in your studies of the early history of the Empire and of the Kingdom of Trantor?"

"No, I haven't. I don't want to hurt your feelings, Hari, but I don't recall coming across any piece of history in which Helicon played a role."

"I'm not hurt, Dors. Happy the world without a history, I always say. —In any case, about twenty-four hundred years ago, there arose a group of people on Helicon who were quite convinced that Helicon was the only inhabited globe in the universe. Helicon *was* the universe and beyond it there was only a solid sphere of sky speckled with tiny stars."

"How could they believe that?" said Dors. "They were part of the Empire, I presume."

"Yes, but Globalists insisted that all evidence to the effect that the Empire existed was either illusion or deliberate deceit; that Imperial emissaries and officials were Heliconians playing a part for some reason. They were absolutely immune to reason."

"And what happened?"

"I suppose it's always pleasant to think that your particular world is *the* world. At their peak, the Globalists may have persuaded ten percent of the population of the planet to be part of the movement. Only ten percent, but they were a vehement minority that drowned out the indifferent majority and threatened to take over."

"But they didn't, did they?"

"No, they didn't. What happened was that Globalism caused a diminishing of Imperial trade and the Heliconian economy slid into the doldrums. When the belief began to affect the pocketbook of the population, it lost popularity rapidly. The rise and fall puzzled many at the time, but Psychohistory, I'm sure, would have shown it to be inevitable and would have made it unnecessary to give it any thought."

"I see. But, Hari, what is the point of this story? I presume there's some connection with what we were discussing."

"The connection is that such movements never completely die, no matter how ridiculous their tenets may seem to sane people. Right now, on Helicon, *right now* there are still Globalists. Not many, but every once in a while seventy or eighty of them get together in what they call a Global Congress and take enormous pleasure in talking to each other about Globablism. —Well, it is only ten years since the Joranumite movement seemed such a terrible threat on this world, and it would not be at all surprising if there weren't still some remnants left. There may still be some remnants a thousand years from now."

"Isn't it possible that a remnant may be dangerous?"

"I doubt it. It was JoJo's charisma that made it dangerous and he's dead. He didn't even die a heroic death or one that was in any way remarkable; just withered away and died in exile, a broken man."

Dors stood up and walked the length of the room quickly, her arms swinging at her sides and her fists clenching. She returned and stood before the seated Seldon.

"Hari," she said, "let me speak my mind. If Psychohistory points to the possibility of serious disturbances on Trantor then, if there are Joranumites still left, they may still be aiming for the death of the Emperor."

Seldon laughed nervously. "You jump at shadows, Dors. Relax."

But he found that he could not dismiss what she had said quite that easily.

5.

The Sector of Wye had a tradition of opposition to the Entun Dynasty of Cleon I that had been ruling the Empire for over two centuries. The opposition dated back to a time when the line of Mayors of Wye had contributed members who had served as Emperor. The Wyan dynasty had neither lasted long nor had it been conspicuously successful, but the people and rulers of Wye found it difficult to forget that they had once been—however imperfectly and temporarily—supreme. The brief period when Rashelle, as Mayoress of Wye, had challenged the Empire, eighteen years earlier, had added both to Wye's pride and to its frustration.

All this made it reasonable that the small band of leading conspirators should feel as safe in Wye as they would feel anywhere on Trantor.

Five of them sat about a table in a room in a run-down portion of the sector. The room was poorly furnished but well-shielded.

In a chair which was marginally superior in quality to the others sat the man who might well be judged by this fact to be the leader. He had a thin face, a sallow complexion, a wide mouth with lips so pale as to be nearly invisible. There was a touch of gray in his hair, but his eyes burned with an inextinguishable anger.

He was staring at the man seated exactly opposite him; distinctly older and softer, hair almost white, with plump cheeks that tended to quiver when he spoke.

The leader said sharply, "Well? It is quite apparent you have done nothing. Explain that!"

The older man tried to bluster. He said, "I am an old Joranumite, Namarti. Why do I have to explain my actions?"

Gambol Deen Namarti, once the right hand man of Laskin "JoJo" Joranum, said. "There are many old Joranumites. Some are incompetent; some are soft; some have forgotten. Being an old Joranumite may mean no more than that one is an old fool."

The older man sat back in his chair. "Are you calling me an old fool? Me? I am Kaspal Kaspalov—I was with JoJo when you had not yet joined the party, when you were a ragged nothing looking for a cause."

"I am not calling you a fool," said Namarti sharply. "I say simply that some old Joranumites are fools. You have a chance now to show me that you are not one of them."

"My association with JoJo—"

"Forget that. He's dead!"

"I should think his spirit lives on."

"If that thought will help us in our fight then his spirit lives on. But to others; not to us. We know he made mistakes."

"I deny that."

"Don't insist on making a hero out of a mere man who made mistakes. He thought he could move the world by the strength of oratory alone, by words—"

"History shows that words have moved mountains in the past."

"Not Joranum's words, obviously, because he made mistakes. He hid his Mycogenian origins and did it too clumsily. Worse, he let himself be tricked into accusing the old First Minister of being a robot. I warned him against that robot accusation, but he wouldn't listen—and it destroyed him. Now let's start fresh, shall we? Whatever use we make of Joranum's memory for the outside world, let us not ourselves be transfixed by it."

Kaspalov sat silent. The other three transferred their gaze from Namarti to Kaspalov and back, content to let Namarti carry the weight of the discussion.

"With Joranum's exile to Nishaya, the Joranumite movement fell apart and seemed to vanish," said Namarti, harshly. "It would indeed have vanished but for me. Bit by bit and fragment by fragment, I rebuilt it into a network that extends over all of Trantor. You know this, I take it."

"I know it, Chief," mumbled Kaspalov. The use of the title made it plain he was seeking reconciliation now.

Namarti smiled tightly. He did not insist on the title but he always enjoyed hearing it used. He said, "You're part of this network and you have your duties."

Kaspalov stirred. He was clearly debating with himself internally and, finally, he said slowly, "You tell me, Chief, that you warned Joranum against accusing the old First Minister. You say he didn't listen, but at least you had your say. May I have the same privilege of pointing out what I think is a mistake and have you listen to me as Joranum listened to you, even if you, like he, don't take the advice given you?"

"Of course you can speak your piece, Kaspalov. You are here in order that you might do so. What is your point?"

"These new tactics of ours, Chief, are a mistake. They create disruption and do damage."

"Of course! They are designed to do that." Namarti stirred in his seat, controlling his anger with an effort. "Joranum tried persuasion. It didn't work. We will bring Trantor down by action."

"For how long? And at what cost?"

"For as long as it takes, and at very little cost, actually. A power stoppage here, a water break there, a sewage backup, an air-conditioning halt. Inconvenience and discomfort; that's all it means."

Kaspalov shook his head. "These things are cumulative."

"Of course, Kaspalov, and we want public dismay and resentment to be cumulative, too. Listen, Kaspalov. The Empire is decaying. Everyone knows that. Everyone capable of intelligent thought knows that. The technology will fail here and there even if we do nothing. We're just helping it along a little."

"It's dangerous, Chief. Trantor's infrastructure is incredibly complicated. A careless push may bring it down in ruins. Pull the wrong string and Trantor may topple, like a house of cards."

"It hasn't so far."

"It may in the future. And what if the people find out that we are behind it? They would tear us apart. There would be no need to call in the police or the armed forces. Mobs would destroy us."

"How would they ever learn enough to blame us? The natural target for the people's resentment will be the government—the Emperor's advisers. They will never look beyond that."

"And how do we live with ourselves, knowing what we have done?"

This last was asked in a whisper, the old man clearly moved by strong emotion. His eyes looked pleadingly across the table at his leader, the man to whom he had sworn allegiance. He had done so in the belief that Namarti would truly continue to bear the standard of freedom passed on by Laskin Joranum; now, Kaspalov wondered if this was how JoJo would have wanted his dream to come to pass.

Namarti clucked his tongue, much as a reproving parent does when confronting an errant child.

"Kaspalov, you can't seriously be turning sentimental on us, can you? Once we are in power, we will pick up the pieces and rebuild. We will gather in the people with all of Joranum's old talk of popular participation in government, with greater representation, and when we are firmly in power we will establish a more efficient and forceful government. We will then have a better Trantor and a stronger Empire. We will set up some sort of discussion system whereby representatives of world regions can talk themselves into a daze, but we will do the governing."

Kaspalov sat there, irresolute.

Namarti smiled joylessly."You are not certain? We can't lose. It's been working perfectly, and it will continue working perfectly. The Emperor doesn't know what's going on. He hasn't the faintest notion. And his First Minister is a mathematician. He ruined Joranum, true, but since then he has done nothing."

"He has something called—called—"

"Forget it. Joranum attached a great deal of importance to it, but it was a part of his being Mycogenian, like his robot mania. This mathematician has *nothing*—"

"Historical psychoanalysis, or something like that. I heard Joranum once say—"

"*Forget* it. Just do your part. You handle the ventilation in the Anemoria sector, don't you? Very well, then. Have it malfunction in a manner of your choosing. It either shuts down so that the humidity rises, or it produces a peculiar odor, or something else. None of this will kill anyone, so don't get yourself into a fever of virtuous guilt. You will simply make people uncomfortable and raise the general level of discomfort and annoyance. Can we depend on you?"

"But what would only be discomfort and annoyance to the young and healthy, may be more than that to infants, the aged, and the sick."

"Are you going to insist that no one at all must be hurt?"

Kaspalov mumbled something.

Namarti said, "It's impossible to do *anything* with a guarantee that no one at all will be hurt. Your just do your job. Do it in such a way that you hurt as few as possible, if your conscience insists upon it, but do it."

Kaspalov said, "Look! I have one thing more to say, Chief."

"Then say it," said Namarti wearily.

"We can spend years poking at the infrastructure. The time must come when you take advantage of gathering dissatisfaction to seize the government. How do you intend to do that?"

"You want to know exactly how we'll do it?"

"Yes, the faster we strike, the more limited the damage, the more efficiently the surgery is performed."

Namarti said slowly, "I have not yet decided on the nature of this surgical strike. But it will come. Until then will you do your part?"

Kaspalov nodded his head in resignation. "Yes, Chief."

"Well, then, go," said Namarti, with a sharp gesture of dismissal.

Kaspalov rose, turned, and left. Namarti watched him go. He said to the man at his right, "Kaspalov is not be trusted. He has sold out and it's only so that he can betray us that he wants to know my plans for the future. Take care of him."

The other nodded, and all three left, leaving Namarti alone in the room. He switched off the glowing wall panels, leaving only a lonely square in the ceiling to provide the light that would keep him from being entirely in the darkness.

He thought: Every chain has weak links that must be eliminated. We have had to do this in the past and the result is that we have an organization that is untouchable.

And in the dimness, he smiled, twisting his face into a kind of feral joy. After all, the network extended even into the Palace itself—not quite firmly, not quite reliably, but it was there. And it would be strengthened.

6.

The weather was holding up over the undomed area of the Imperial Palace grounds—warm and sunny.

It didn't often happen. Hari remembered Dors telling him once how it came about that this particular area, with its cold winters and frequent rains, had been chosen as the site.

"It wasn't actually *chosen*," she said. "It was a family estate of the Morovian family in the days when all there was was a Kingdom of Trantor. When the Kingdom became an Empire, there were numerous sites where the Emperor could live—summer resorts, winter places, sports lodges, beach properties. And, as the planet was slowly domed, one reigning Emperor, living here, liked it, and it remained undomed. And, just because it was the *only* area left undomed, it became special—a place apart—and that uniqueness appealed to the next Emperor, and the next, and the next . . . and so, a tradition was born."

And as always, when hearing something like that, Seldon would think: And how would psychohistory handle this? Would it predict that one area would remain undomed but be absolutely unable to say which area? Could it go even so far? Could it predict that several areas would remain undomed, or none—and be wrong? How could it account for the personal likes and dislikes of an Emperor who happened to be on the throne at the crucial time and who made a decision in a moment of whimsy and nothing more? That way chaos lay—and madness.

Cleon I was clearly enjoying the good weather.

"I'm getting old, Seldon," he said. "I don't have to tell you that. We're the same age, you and I. Surely it's a sign of age when I don't have the impulse to play tennis, or go fishing, even though they've newly restocked the lake, but am willing to walk gently over the pathways."

He was eating nuts as he spoke, something which resembled what on Seldon's native world of Helicon would have been called pumpkin seeds, but which were larger, and a little less delicate in taste. Cleon cracked them gently between his teeth, peeled the thin shells and popped the kernels into his mouth.

Seldon did not like the taste particularly but, of course, when he was offered some by the Emperor, he accepted them, and ate a few.

The Emperor had a number of shells in his hand and looked vaguely about for a receptacle of some sort that he could use for disposal. He saw none, but he did notice a gardener standing not far away, his body at attention, as it should be in the Imperial presence, and his head respectfully bowed.

Cleon said, "Gardener!"

The gardener approached quickly. "Sire!"

"Get rid of these for me," and he tapped the shells into the gardener's hand.

"Yes, sire."

Seldon said, "I have a few, too, Gruber."

Gruber held out his hand and said, almost shyly, "Yes, First Minister."

He hurried away, and the Emperor looked after him curiously. "Do you know the fellow, Seldon?"

"Yes, indeed, Sire. An old friend."

"The *gardener* is an old friend? What is he? A mathematical colleague fallen on hard times?"

"No, Sire. Perhaps you remember the story. It was the time when" (he cleared his throat searching for the most tactful way to recall the incident) "the sergeant threatened my life shortly after I was appointed to my present post through your kindness."

"The assassination attempt." Cleon looked up to heaven as though seeking patience. "I don't know why everyone is so afraid of that word."

"Perhaps," said Seldon, smoothly, slightly despising himself for the ease with which he had come to be able to flatter, "the rest of us are more perturbed at the possibility of something untoward happening to our Emperor than you yourself are."

Cleon smiled ironically. "I dare say. And what has this to do with Gruber? Is that his name?"

"Yes, Sire. Mandell Gruber. I'm sure you will recall, if you cast your mind back, that there was a gardener who came rushing up with a rake to defend me against the armed sergeant."

"Ah, yes. Was he the gardener who did that?"

"He was the man, Sire. I've considered him a friend ever since, and I meet him almost every time I am on the grounds. I think he watches for me; feels proprietary toward me. And, of course, I feel kindly toward him."

"I don't blame you. —And while we're on the subject, how is your formidable lady, Ms. Venabili? I don't see her often."

"She's a historian, Sire. Lost in the past."

"She doesn't frighten you? She'd frighten me. I've been told how she treated that sergeant. One could almost be sorry for him."

"She grows savage on my behalf, Sire, but has not had occasion to do so lately. It's been very quiet."

The Emperor looked after the disappearing gardener. "Have we ever rewarded that man?"

"I have done so, Sire. He has a wife and two daughters and I have arranged that each daughter will have a sum of money put aside for the education of any children she may have."

"Very good. But he needs a promotion, I think. —Is he a good gardener?"

"Excellent, Sire."

"The Chief Gardener, Malcomber—I'm not quite sure I remember his name—is getting on and is, perhaps, not up to the job any more. He is well into his late seventies. Do you think this Gruber might be able to take over?"

"I'm certain he can, Sire, but he likes his present job. It keeps him out in the open in all kinds of weathers."

"A peculiar recommendation for a job. I'm sure he can get used to administration, and I *do* need someone for some sort of renewal of the grounds. Hmmm. I must think upon this. Your friend Gruber may be just the man I need. —By the way, Seldon, what did you mean by saying it's been very quiet?"

"I merely meant, Sire, that there has been no sign of discord at the Imperial Court. The unavoidable tendency to intrigue seems to be as near a minimum as it is ever likely to get."

"You wouldn't say that if you were Emperor, Seldon, and had to contend with all these officials and their complaints."

"They should bring these complaints to me, Sire."

"They know my soft heart, Seldon, and avoid your harshness."

"Sire!"

"Just joking. However, that's not what I mean. How can you tell me things are quiet when reports seem to reach me every other week of some serious breakdown here and there on Trantor?"

"These things are bound to happen."

"I don't recall that such things happened so frequently in previous years."

"Perhaps that was because they didn't, Sire. The infrastructure grows older with time. To make the necessary repairs properly would take time, labor, and enormous expense. This is not a time when a rise in taxes will be looked on favorably."

"There's never any such time. I gather that the people are experiencing serious dissatisfaction over these breakdowns. It must stop and you must see to it, Seldon. What does Psychohistory say?"

"It says what common sense says, that everything is growing older."

"Well, all this is quite spoiling the pleasant day for me. I leave it in your hands, Seldon."

"Yes, Sire," said Seldon submissively.

The Emperor strode off and Seldon thought that it was all spoiling the pleasant day for him, too. This breakdown at the center was the alternative he didn't want. But how was he to prevent it and switch the crisis to the Periphery?

Psychohistory didn't say.

7.

Raych Seldon felt extraordinarily contented, for it was the first dinner *en famille* that he had had in some months with the two people he thought of as his father and mother. He knew perfectly well that they were not his parents in any biological sense, but it didn't matter. He merely smiled at them in complete love.

The surroundings were not as warm as they had been at Streeling in the old days, when their home had been small and intimate, and had sat like a comfortable gem in the larger setting of the university. Now, unfortunately, nothing could hide the grandeur of a Palace suite.

Raych sometimes stared at himself in the mirror and wondered how it could be. He was not tall, only 163 centimeters in height, distinctly shorter than either parent. He was rather stocky, but muscular, and not fat, with black hair and the distinctive Dahlite mustache that he kept as dark and as thick as possible.

In the mirror, he could still see the street-urchin he had once been before the chanciest of great chances had dictated his meeting with Seldon and Venabili. Seldon had been much younger then, and his appearance now made it plain that Raych himself was almost as old now as Seldon had been when they met.

Amazingly, his mother, Dors, had hardly changed at all. She was as sleek and fit as the day she and Hari were accosted by young Raych and his fellow Billibotton gang members. And he, Raych, born to poverty and misery, was now a member of the civil service, a small cog in the Ministry of Populations.

Seldon said, "How are things going at the Ministry, Raych? Any progress?"

"Some, Dad. The laws are passed. The court decisions are made. Speeches are pronounced. Still, it's difficult to move people. You can preach brotherhood all you want, but no one feels like a brother. What gets me is that the Dahlites are as bad as any of the others. They want to be treated as equals, they say, and so they do, but, given a chance, they have no desire to treat others as equals."

Venabili said, "It's all but impossible to change people's minds and hearts, Raych. It's enough to try and perhaps eliminate the worst of the injustices."

"The trouble is," said Seldon, "that through most of history, no one's been working on this problem. Human beings have been allowed to fester in the delightful game of I'm-better-than-you, and cleaning up that mess isn't easy. If we allow things to follow their own bent and grow worse for a thousand years, we can't complain if it takes, say, one hundred years to work an improvement."

"Sometimes, Dad," said Raych, "I think you gave me this job to punish me."

Seldon's eyebrows raised. "What motivation could I have had to punish you?"

"For feeling attracted to Joranum's program of sector-equality and for greater popular representation in government."

"I don't blame you for that. These are attractive suggestions, but you know that Joranum and his gang were using it only as a device to gain power. Afterward—"

"But you had me entrap him despite my attraction to his views."

Seldon said, "It wasn't easy for me to ask you to do that."

"And now you keep me working at the implementation of Joranum's program, just to show me how hard the task is in reality."

Seldon said to Venabili, "How do you like that, Dors? The boy attributes to me a kind of sneaky underhandedness that simply isn't part of my character."

"Surely," said Venabili, with the ghost of a smile playing at her lips, "you are attributing no such thing to your father."

"Not really. In the ordinary course of life, there's no one straighter than you, Dad. But if you *have* to, you know you can stack the cards. Isn't that what you hope to do with Psychohistory?"

Seldon said sadly, "So far, I've done very little with Psychohistory."

"Too bad. I keep thinking that there is some sort of psychohistorical solution to the problem of human bigotry."

"Maybe there is, but, if so, I haven't found it."

When dinner was over, Seldon said, "You and I, Raych, are going to have a little talk now."

"Indeed?" said Venabili. "I take it I'm not invited."

"Ministerial business, Dors."

"Ministerial nonsense, Hari. You're going to ask the poor boy to do something I wouldn't want him to do."

Seldon said firmly, "I'm certainly not going to ask him to do anything *he* doesn't want to do."

Raych said, "It's all right, Mom. Let Dad and me have our talk. I promise I'll tell you all about it afterward."

Venabili's eyes rolled upward. "You two will plead 'state secrets.' I know it."

"As a matter of fact," said Seldon firmly. "That's exactly what I must discuss. And of the first magnitude. I'm serious, Dors."

Venabili rose, her lips tightening. She left the room with one final injunction. "Don't throw the boy to the wolves, Hari."

And after she was gone, Seldon said quietly, "I'm afraid that throwing you to the wolves is exactly what I'll have to do, Raych."

8.

They faced each other in Seldon's private Ministerial office, his "thinking place" as he called it. There he had spent uncounted hours trying to think his way past and through the complexities of Trantorian and Imperial government.

He said, "Have you read much about the recent breakdowns we've been having in planetary services, Raych?"

"Yes," said Raych, "but you know, Dad, we've got an old planet here. What we gotta do is get everyone off it, dig the whole thing up, replace everything, add the latest computerizations, and then bring everyone back, or at least half of everyone. Trantor would be much better off with only twenty billion people."

"Which twenty billion?" asked Seldon, smiling.

"I wish I knew," said Raych darkly. "The trouble is we can't redo the planet, so we just gotta keep patching."

"I'm afraid so, Raych, but there are some peculiar things about it. Now I want you to check me out. I have some thoughts about this."

He brought a small sphere out of his pocket.

"What's that?" asked Raych.

"It's a map of Trantor, carefully programmed. Do me a favor, Raych, and clear off this table top."

Seldon placed the sphere more or less in the middle of the table and placed his hand on a keypad in the arm of his desk chair. He used his thumb to close a contact and the light in the room went out while the table top glowed with a soft ivory light that seemed about a centimeter deep. The sphere had flattened and expanded to the edges of the table.

The light slowly darkened in spots and took on a pattern. After some thirty seconds, Raych said, in surprise, "It *is* a map of Trantor."

"Of course. I told you it was. You can't buy anything like this at a sector mall, though. This is one of those gadgets the armed forces play with. It could present Trantor as a sphere, but a planar projection would more clearly show what I want to show."

"And what is it you want to show, Dad?"

"Well, in the last year or two, there have been breakdowns. As you say, it's an old planet and we've got to expect breakdowns, but they've been coming more frequently and they would seem, almost uniformly, to be the result of human error."

"Isn't that reasonable?"

"Yes, of course. Within limits. This is true even where earthquakes are involved."

"Earthquakes? On Trantor?"

"I admit Trantor is a fairly non-seismic planet, and a good thing, too, because enclosing a world in a dome when the world is going to shake itself badly several times a year and smash a section of the dome would be highly impractical. Your mother says that one of the reasons Trantor, rather than some other world, became the Imperial capital is that it was geologically moribund—that's her unflattering expression. Still, it might be moribund, but it's not dead. There are occasional minor earthquakes, three of them in the last two years."

"I wasn't aware of that, Dad."

"Hardly anyone is. The dome isn't a single object. It exists in hundreds of sections, each one of which can be lifted and set ajar to relieve tensions and compressions in case of an earthquake. Since an earthquake, when one does occur, lasts for only ten seconds to a minute, the opening endures only briefly. It comes and goes so rapidly that the Trantorians beneath are not even aware of it. They are much more aware of a mild tremor, and a faint rattling of crockery, than of the opening and closing of the dome overhead and the slight intrusion of the outside weather, whatever it is."

"That's good, isn't it?"

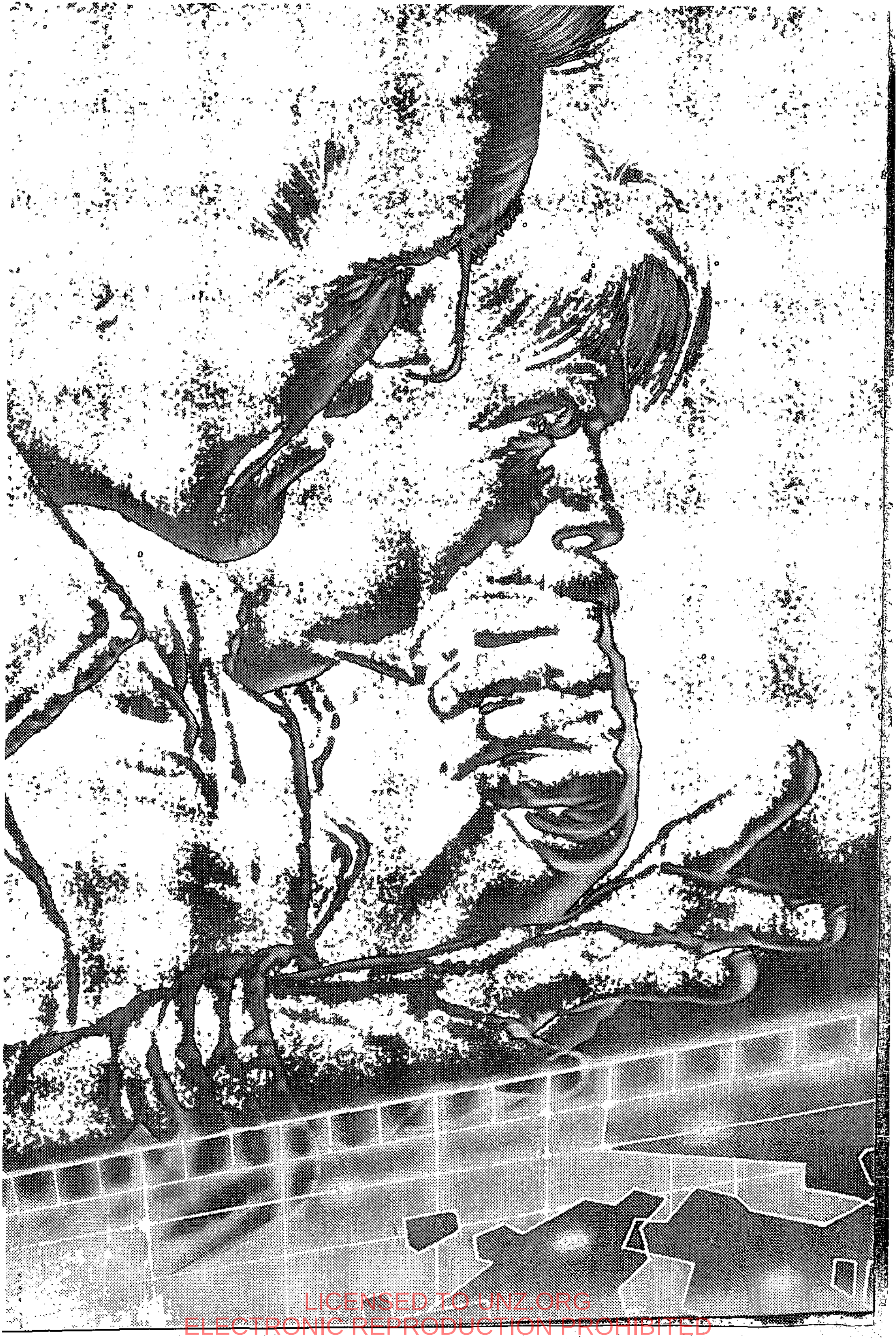
"It should be. It's computerized, of course. The coming of an earthquake anywhere sets off the key controls for the opening and closing of that section of the dome, so that it opens just before the vibration becomes strong enough to do damage."

"Still good."

"But in the case of the three minor earthquakes over the last two years, the dome controls failed in each case. The dome never opened, and in each case repairs were required. It took some time, it took some money, and the weather controls were less than optimum for a considerable time. Now what, Raych, are the chances that the equipment would have failed in all three cases?"

"Not high?"

"Not high at all. Less than one in a hundred. One can suppose that someone had gimmicked the controls in advance of an earthquake. Now once a century, we have a magma leak, which is far more difficult to control, and I'd hate to think of the results if it went unnoticed till it was too late. Fortunately that hasn't happened, and isn't likely to, but



consider— Here on this map you will find the location of the breakdowns that have plagued us over the past two years and that seem to be attributable to human error, though we haven't once been able to tell to *whom* it might be attributed."

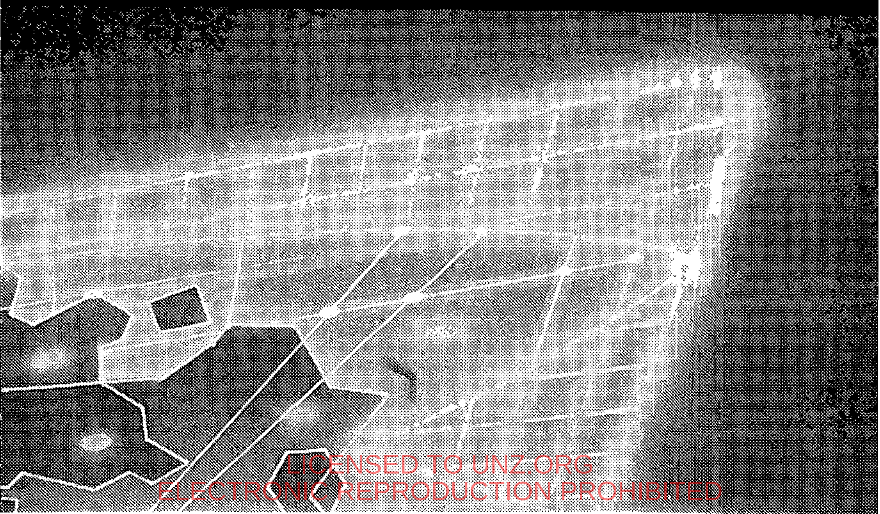
"That's because everyone is busy protecting his back."

"I'm afraid you're right. That's a characteristic of any bureaucracy and Trantor's is the largest in history. —But what do you think of the locations?"

The map had lit up with bright little red markings that looked like small pustules covering the land surface of Trantor.

"Well," said Raych cautiously. "They seem to be evenly spread."

"Exactly, and that's what's interesting. One would expect that the older sections of Trantor, the sections longest domed, would have the most decayed infrastructure and would be more liable to events requiring quick human decision and laying the groundwork for possible human error. —I'll superimpose the older sections of Trantor on the map in a



aking place on the blue any oftener than on

"And?"

"And what I think it means, Raych, is that the breakdowns are not of atural origin, but are deliberately caused, and spread out in this fashion affect as many people as possible, thus creating a dissatisfaction that as wide-spread as possible."

"It don't seem likely."

"No? Then let's look at the breakdowns as spread through time rather han through space."

The blue areas and the red spots disappeared and, for a time, the ap of Trantor was blank, and then the markings began to appear and isappear one at a time, here and there.

"Notice," said Seldon, "that they don't appear in clumps in time, either. ne appears, then another, then another, and so on, almost like the teady ticking of a metronome."

"Do ya think that's on purpose too?"

"It must be. Whoever is bringing this about wants to cause as much isruption with as little effort as possible, so there's no use doing two at nce, where one will partially cancel the other in the news and in the ublic consciousness. Each incident must stand out in full irritation."

The map went out, the lights went on. Seldon returned the sphere, hrunken back to its original size, to his pocket.

Raych said, "Who would be doing all this?"

Seldon said thoughtfully, "A few days ago, I received a report of a urder in Wye sector."

"That's not unusual," said Raych. "Even though Wye isn't one of your eally lawless sectors, there must be lots of murders there every day."

"Hundreds," said Seldon, shaking his head. "We've had bad days when he number of deaths by violence in Trantor as a whole approaches the illion-a-day mark. Generally, there's not much chance of finding every ulprit, every murderer. The dead just enter the books as anonymous tatistics.

"This one, however, was unusual. The man had been knifed, but unskillfully. He was still alive when found, just barely. He had time to gasp ut one word before he died, and that was, 'Chief.'

"That roused a certain curiosity and he was actually identified. He orks in Anemoria and what he was doing in Wye, we don't know. But hen, some worthy officer managed to dig up the fact that he was an old oranumite. His name was Kaspal Kaspalov, and he is well-known to ave been one of the intimates of Laskin Joranum. And now he's dead, nifed."

Raych frowned, "Are you suspecting a Joranumite conspiracy? There ren't any Joranumites around anymore."

"It wasn't long ago that your mother asked me if I thought that the oranumites were still active, and I told her that any odd belief always etained a certain cadre, sometimes for centuries. They're usually not very important; just splinter groups that simply don't count. Still, what if the Joranumites have kept up an organization, what if they have retained a certain strength, what if they are capable of killing someone they consider a traitor in their ranks, and what if they are producing these breakdowns as a preliminary to seizing control?"

"That's an awful lot of 'if's, Dad."

"I know that. And I might be totally wrong. The murder happened in Wye and, as it further happens, there have been no infrastructure breakdowns in Wye."

"What does that prove?"

"It might prove that the center of the conspiracy is in Wye and that the conspirators don't want to make themselves uncomfortable, only the rest of Trantor. It also might mean that it's not the Joranumites at all, but the old Wyan ruling house that still dreams of Empire."

"Oh, boy, Dad. You're building all this on very little."

"I know. Now suppose it *is* a Joranumite conspiracy. Joranum had, as his right-hand man, Gambol Deen Namarti. We have no record of his death, no record of his having left Trantor, no record of his life over the last nine years or so. That's not terribly surprising. After all, it's easy to lose oneself among forty billion. There was a time in my life when I tried to do just that. Of course, he may be dead. That would be the easiest explanation, but he may not be."

"What do we do about it?"

Seldon sighed. "The logical thing would be to turn to the police, to the security establishment, but I can't. I don't have Demerzel's presence. He could cow people; I can't. He had a powerful personality; I'm just a . . .mathematician. I shouldn't be in the post of First Minister; I'm not fitted for it. And I wouldn't be, if the Emperor weren't fixated on Psychohistory to a far greater extent than it deserves."

"You're kinda whipping yourself, ain't you, Dad?"

"Yes. I suppose I am, but I have a picture of myself going to the security forces, for instance, with what I have just shown you on the map" (he pointed to the now-empty table top) "and arguing that we are in great danger of some conspiracy of unknown consequence and nature. They would listen solemnly and, after I had left, they would laugh among themselves, and joke about 'the mathematician,' and they would do nothing."

"Then what do we do about it?" said Raych, returning to the point.

"It's what *you* will do about it, Raych. I need more evidence and I want you to find it for me. I would send your mother, but she won't leave me under any circumstances. I myself can't leave the Palace grounds at this time. Next to Dors and myself, I trust you. More than Dors and myself, in fact. You're still quite young, you're strong, you're a better Heliconian Twister than I ever was, and you're smart."

"Wow, Dad. I wish you'd put that in writing!"

"Mind you, now, I don't want you to risk your life. No heroism, no derring-do. I couldn't face your mother if anything happened to you. Just find out what you can. Perhaps you'll find that Namarti is alive and operating—or dead. Perhaps you'll find out that the Joranumites are an active group—or moribund. Perhaps you'll find out that the Wyan ruling family is active—or not. Any of that would be interesting, but not vital. What I want you to find out is whether the infrastructure breakdowns are of human manufacture, as I think they are, and, far more important still, if they are deliberately caused, what else the conspirators plan to do. It seems to me they must have plans for some major coup, and, if so, I must know what that will be."

Raych said cautiously, "Do you have some kinda plan to get me started?"

"Yes, indeed, Raych. I want you to go down to Wye where Kaspalov was killed. Find out if you can if he was an active Joranumite and see if you can't join a Joranumite cell yourself."

"Maybe that's possible. I can always pretend to be an old Joranumite. Just a kid when JoJo was sounding off, but I was very impressed by his ideas. It's even sorta true."

"Well, yes, but there's one important catch. You might be recognized. After all, you're the son of the First Minister. You have appeared on holovision now and then, you've been an attraction for the news reports, you have been interviewed on your views on sector equality."

"Sure, but—"

"No buts, Raych. You'll wear elevated shoes to add three centimeters to your height, and we'll have someone show you how to change the shape of your eyebrows and make your face fuller and change the timbre of your voice."

Raych shrugged. "A lotta trouble for nothing."

"*And,*" said Seldon, with a distinct quaver, "you will shave off your mustache."

Raych's eyes widened and for a moment he sat there in appalled silence. Finally, he said, in a hoarse whisper, "Shave my mustache?"

"Clean as a whistle. No one would recognize you without it."

"But it can't be done. Like cutting your—like castration."

Seldon shook his head. "It's just a cultural curiosity. Yugo is as Dahlite as you are and he wears no mustache."

"Yugo is a *nut.* I don't think he's alive at all except for his mathematics."

"He's a great mathematician and the absence of a mustache does not alter that fact. Besides, it's *not* castration. Your mustache will grow back in two weeks."

"Two weeks! It'll take two *years* to reach this—this—"

He put his hand up as though to cover and protect it.

Seldon said inexorably, "Raych, you have to do it. It's a sacrifice you must make. If you act as my spy *with* your mustache, you may—come to harm. I can't take that chance."

"I'd *rather* die," said Raych violently.

"Don't be melodramatic," said Seldon severely. "You would *not* rather die, and this is something you *must* do. However," and here he hesitated, "don't say anything about it to your mother. I will take care of that."

Raych stared at his father in frustration and then said, in a low and despairing tone, "All right, Dad."

Seldon said, "I will get someone to supervise your disguise and then you will go to Wye by air. —Buck up, Raych, it's not the end of the world."

Raych smiled wanly, and Seldon watched him leave, a deeply troubled look on his face. A mustache could easily be regrown, but a son could not. Seldon was perfectly well aware that he was sending Raych into danger.

9.

We all have our small illusions and Cleon I, Emperor of the Galaxy, King of Trantor, and a wide collection of other titles that, on rare occasions, could be called out in a long sonorous roll, was convinced that he was a person of democratic spirit.

It always angered him when he was warned off a course of action by Demerzel, or, later, by Seldon, on the grounds that such action would be looked on as tyrannical or despotic.

He was not a tyrant or despot by disposition, he was certain; he only wanted to take firm and decisive action.

He spoke many times with nostalgic approval of the days when Emperors could mingle freely with their subjects, but now, of course when the history of coups and assassinations, actual or attempted, had become a dreary fact of life, the Emperor had had to be shut off from the world.

It is doubtful that Cleon, who had never in his life met with people except under the most constricted of conditions, would really have felt at home in off-hand encounters with strangers, but he always imagined he would enjoy it. He was grateful, therefore, for a rare chance of talking to one of the underlings on the grounds, to smile, and to doff the trappings of Imperial rule for a few minutes. It made him feel democratic.

There was this gardener whom Seldon had spoken of, for instance. It would be fitting, rather a pleasure, to reward him belatedly for his loyalty and bravery, and to do so himself, rather than leaving it to some functionary.

He therefore arranged to meet him in the spacious rose garden which, at this time, was in full bloom. That would be appropriate, Cleon thought, but, of course, they would have to bring the gardener there first. It was unthinkable for the Emperor to be made to wait. It is one thing to be democratic; quite another to be inconvenienced.

The gardener was waiting for him among the roses, his eyes wide, his lips trembling. It occurred to Cleon that it was possible no one had told the fellow the exact reason for the meeting. Well, he would reassure him in kindly fashion—except that, now he came to think of it, he could not remember the fellow's name.

He turned to one of the officials at his side, and said, "What is the gardener's name?"

"Sire, it is Mandell Gruber. He has been a gardener here for twenty-two years."

The Emperor nodded, and said, "Ah, Gruber. How glad I am to meet a worthy and hard-working gardener."

"Sire," mumbled Gruber, his teeth chattering. "I am not a man of many talents, but it is always my best I try to do on behalf of your gracious self."

"Of course, of course," said the Emperor, wondering if the gardener suspected him of sarcasm. These men of the lower classes lacked the finer feelings that came with refinement and manners. It was what always made any attempt at democratic display difficult.

Cleon said, "I have heard from my First Minister of the loyalty with which you once came to his aid, and your skill in taking care of the grounds. The First Minister tells me that he and you are quite friendly."

"Sire, the First Minister is most gracious to me, but I know my place. I never speak to him unless he speaks first."

"Quite, Gruber. That shows good feeling on your part, but the First Minister, like myself, is a man of democratic impulses, and I trust his judgment of people."

Gruber bowed low.

The Emperor said, "As you know, Gruber, the Chief Gardener, Malcomber, is quite old and longs to retire. The responsibilities are becoming greater than he can bear."

"Sire, the Chief Gardener is much respected by all the gardeners. May he be spared for many years so that we can all come to him for the benefit of his wisdom and judgment."

"Well said, Gruber," said the Emperor carelessly, "but you very well know that that is just mumbo-jumbo. He is not going to be spared, at least not with the strength and wit necessary for the position. He himself requests retirement within the year and I have granted him that. It remains to find a replacement."

"Oh, Sire, there are fifty men and women in this grand place who could be Chief Gardener."

"I dare say," said the Emperor, "But my choice has fallen upon you." The Emperor smiled graciously. This was the moment he had been waiting for. Gruber would now, he expected, fall to his knees in an ecstasy of gratitude.

He did not, and the Emperor frowned.

Gruber said, "Sire, it is an honor that is too great for me, entirely."

"Nonsense," said Cleon, offended that his judgment should be called into question. "It is about time that your virtues are recognized. You will no longer have to be exposed to weather of all kinds at all times of the year. You will have the Chief Gardener's office, a fine place, which I will have redecorated for you, and where you can bring your family—You do have a family, don't you, Gruber?"

"Yes, sire. A wife, and two daughters. And a son-in-law."

"Very good. You will be very comfortable and you will enjoy your new life, Gruber. You will be indoors, Gruber, and out of the weather, like a true Trantorian."

"Sire, consider that I am an Anacreonian by upbringing—"

"I have considered, Gruber. All worlds are alike to the Emperor. It is done. The new job is what you deserve."

He nodded his head and stalked off. Cleon was satisfied with this latest show of his benevolence. Of course, he could have used a little more gratitude from the fellow, a little more appreciation, but at least it was done.

And it was much easier to have *this* done than to settle the matter of the failing infrastructure.

Cleon had, in a moment of testiness, declared that whenever a breakdown could be attributed to human error, the human being in question should forthwith be executed.

"A few executions," he said, "and it's remarkable how careful everyone will become."

"I'm afraid, Sire," Seldon had said, "that this would be considered despotic behavior and would not accomplish what you wish. It would probably force the workers to go on strike and if you try to force them back to work, there would then be an insurrection, and if you try to replace them with soldiers, you will find they do not know how to control the machinery, so that breakdowns will begin to take place much more frequently."

It was no wonder that Cleon turned to the matter of appointing a Chief Gardener with relief.

As for Gruber, he gazed after the departing Emperor with chill horror. He was going to be taken from the freedom of the open air and condemned to the constriction of four walls.

—Yet how could one refuse the Emperor?

10.

Raych looked in the mirror of his Wye hotel room somberly (it was a pretty rundown hotel room, but Raych was not supposed to have much money). He did not like what he saw. His mustache was gone; his sideburns were shortened; his hair was clipped at the sides and back.

He looked—plucked.

Worse than that. As a result of the change in his facial contours, he looked baby-faced.

It was disgusting.

Nor was he making any headway. Seldon had given him the police reports on Kaspal Kaspalov's death, which he had studied. There wasn't much there. Just that Kaspalov had been murdered and that the local police had come up with nothing of importance in connection with that murder. It seemed quite clear that the police attached little or no importance to it, anyway.

That was not surprising. In the last century, the crime rate had risen markedly in most worlds, *certainly* in the grandly complex world of Trantor, and nowhere were the local police up to the job of doing anything useful about it. In fact, the police had declined in numbers and efficiency everywhere and (while this was hard to prove) had become more corrupt. It was inevitable this should be so, with pay refusing to keep pace with the cost of living. One must *pay* to keep civil officials honest. Failing that, they would surely make up for inadequate salaries in other ways.

Seldon had been preaching that doctrine for some years now, but it did no good. There was no way to increase wages without increasing taxes and the populace would not sit still for increased taxes. It seemed they would rather lose ten times the money in graft.

It was all part (Seldon had said) of the general deterioration of Imperial society over the previous two centuries.

Well, what was Raych to do? He was here at the hotel where Kaspalov had lived during the days immediately before his murder. Somewhere in the hotel there might be someone who had something to do with that, or who knew someone who had.

It seemed to Raych that he must make himself conspicuous. He must show an interest in Kaspalov's death, and then, someone would get interested in *him* and pick *him* up. It was dangerous, but if he could make himself sound harmless enough, they might not attack him immediately.

Well—

Raych looked at the time-strip. There would be people enjoying predinner aperitifs in the bar. He might as well join them, and see what would happen — if anything.

11.

In some respects, Wye could be quite puritanical. (This was true of all the sections, though the rigidity of one sector might be completely different from the rigidity of another.) Here, the drinks were not alcoholic, but were synthetically designed to stimulate in other ways. Raych did not like the taste, finding himself utterly unused to it, but it meant he could sip slowly and have more time to look about.

He caught the eye of a young woman several tables away and, for a moment, had difficulty in looking away. She was attractive, and it was clear that Wye's ways were not puritanical in *every* fashion.

Their eyes clung, and, after a moment, the young woman smiled slightly and rose. She drifted toward Raych's table, while Raych watched her speculatively. He could scarcely (he thought with marked regret) afford a side-adventure just now.

She stopped for a moment when she reached Raych, and then let herself drop smoothly into an adjacent chair.

"Hello," she said, "you don't look like a regular here."

Raych smiled. "I'm not. Do you know all the regulars?"

"Just about," she said, unembarrassed. "My name is Manella. What's yours?"

Raych was more regretful than ever. She was quite tall, taller than he himself was without his heels—something he always found attractive—had a milky complexion, and long, softly wavy hair that had distinct glints of dark red in it. Her clothing was not too garish and she might, if she had tried very hard, have passed as a respectable woman of the not-too-hard-working class.

Raych said, "My name doesn't matter. I don't have much money."

"Oh. Too bad." Manella made a face. "Can't you get some?"

"I'd like to. I need a job. Do you know of any?"

"What kind of job?"

Raych shrugged. "I don't have any experience in anything fancy, but I ain't proud."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "I'll tell you what, nameless. Sometimes it doesn't take much money."

Raych froze at once. He had been successful enough with women, but with his mustache—his mustache. What could she see in his baby-face?

He said, "Tell you what. I had a friend living here a couple of weeks ago and I can't find him. Since you know all the regulars, maybe you know him. His name is Kaspalov. Kaspal Kaspalov." He raised his voice slightly.

She stared at him blankly and shook her head. "I don't know anybody by that name."

"Too bad. He was a Joranumite, and so am I." Again, a blank look. "Do you know what a Joranumite is?"

She shook her head. "N-no. I've heard the word but don't know what it means. Is it some kind of job?"

Raych felt disappointed.

He said, "It would take too long to explain."

It sounded like a dismissal and, after a moment of uncertainty, she rose, and drifted away. She did not smile, and Raych was a little surprised that she had remained as long as she did after it was established that he couldn't afford her.

(Well, Seldon always insisted he had the capacity to inspire affection, but surely not in a business woman. For them, payment was the thing. Of course, it meant they overlooked a man being short, but a number of pleasant ordinary women didn't seem to mind.)

His eyes followed Manella automatically as she stopped at another table, where a man was seated by himself. He was of early middle age, with butter-yellow hair, slicked back. He was very smooth-shaven, but it seemed to Raych he could have used a beard, his chin being too prominent and a bit asymmetric.

Apparently, she had no better luck with this beardless one. A few words were exchanged, and she moved on. Too bad, but it was impossible for her to fail often, surely. She was unquestionably desirable. It was surely just a matter of financial arrangements.

He found himself thinking, quite involuntarily, of what the upshot would be if he, after all, could—and then realized he had been joined by someone else. It was a man this time. It was, in fact, the man to whom Manella had just spoken.

He was astonished that his own preoccupation had allowed him to be thus approached and, in effect, caught by surprise. He couldn't very well afford this sort of thing.

The man looked at him with a glint of curiosity in his eyes. "You were just talking to a friend of mine."

Raych could not help smiling broadly. "She's a friendly person."

"Yes, she is. And a *good* friend of mine. I couldn't help overhearing what you said to her."

"Wasn't nothing wrong, I think."

"Not at all, but you called yourself a Joranumite."

Raych's heart jumped. His remark to Manella had hit dead-center after all. It had meant nothing to her but it seemed to mean something to her "friend."

Did that mean he was on the road now? Or merely in trouble?

12.

Raych did his best to size up his new companion, without allowing his own face to lose its smooth naïvete. The man had sharp eyes and his right hand clenched almost threateningly into a fist as it rested on the table.

Raych looked owlishly at the other, and waited.

Again, the man said, "I understand you call yourself a Joranumite."

Raych did his best to look uneasy. It was not difficult. He said, "Why do you ask, mister?"

"Because I don't think you're old enough."

"I'm old enough. I used to listen to JoJo Joranum's speeches."

"Can you quote them?"

Raych shrugged. "No, but I got the idea."

"You're a brave young man to talk openly about being a Joranumite. Some people don't like that."

"I'm told there are lots of Joranumites in Wye."

"That may be. Is that why you came here?"

"I'm looking for a job. Maybe another Joranumite would help me."

"There are Joranumites in Dahl, too. Where are you from?"

There was no question that he recognized Raych's accent. That could not be disguised.

He said, "I was born in Millimaru, but I lived mostly in Dahl when I was growing up."

"Doing what?"

"Nothing much. Going to school some."

"And why are you a Joranumite?"

Raych let himself heat up a bit. He couldn't have lived in downtrodden, discriminated-against Dahl without having obvious reasons for being a Joranumite. He said, "Because I think there should be more representative government in the Empire; more participation by the people; and more equality among the sectors and the worlds. Doesn't anyone with brains and a heart think that?"

"And you want to see the Emperorship abolished?"

Raych paused. One could get away with a great deal in the way of subversive statements, but anything overtly anti-Emperor was stepping outside the bounds. He said, "I ain't saying that. I believe in the Emperor, but ruling a whole Empire is too much for one man."

"It isn't one man. There's a whole Imperial bureaucracy. What do you think of Hari Seldon, the First Minister?"

"Don't think nothing about him. Don't know about him."

"All you know is that people should be more represented in the affairs of government. Is that right?"

Raych allowed himself to look confused. "That's what JoJo Joranum used to say. I don't know what you call it. I heard someone once call it 'democracy,' but I don't know what that means."

"Democracy is something they have on some worlds; something they call 'democracy.' I don't know that those worlds are run better than other worlds. So you're a democrat?"

"Is that what you call it?" Raych let his head sink as if in deep thought. "I feel more at home as a Joranumite."

"Of course, as a Dahlite—

"I just lived there a while."

"—You're all for people's equalities and such things. The Dahlites, being an oppressed group, would naturally think in that fashion."

"I hear that Wye is pretty strong in Joranumite thinking. *They're* not oppressed."

"Different reason. The old Wye Mayors always wanted to be Emperors. Did you know that?"

Raych shook his head.

"Eighteen years ago," said the man, "Mayor Rashelle nearly carried through a coup in that direction. So the Wyans are rebels; not so much Joranumite as anti-Cleon."

Raych said, "I don't know nothing about that. I ain't against the Emperor."

"But you are for popular representation, aren't you? Do you think that some sort of elected assembly could run the Galactic Empire without bogging down in politics and partisan bickering? Without paralysis?"

Raych said, "Huh? I don't understand."

"Do you think a great many people could come to some decision quickly in times of emergency? Or would they just sit around and argue?"

"I don't know, but it doesn't seem right that just a few people should have all the say over all the worlds."

"Are you willing to fight for your beliefs? Or do you just like to talk about them?"

"No one asked me to do any fighting," said Raych.

"Suppose someone did. How important do you think your beliefs about democracy—or Joranumite philosophy—are?"

"I'd fight for them—if I thought it would do any good."

"There's a brave lad. So you came to Wye to fight for your beliefs."

"No," said Raych, uncomfortably, "I can't say I did. I came to look for a job, sir. It ain't easy to find no jobs these days—and I ain't got no money. A guy gotta live."

"I agree. What's your name?"

The question shot out without warning, but Raych was ready for it. "Planchet, sir."

"First or last name?"

"Only name, as far as I know."

"You have no money and, I gather, very little education."

"Afraid so."

"And no experience at any specialized job?"

"I ain't worked much, but I'm willing."

"All right. I'll tell you what, Planchet." He had taken a small, white triangle out of his pocket and pressed it in such a way as to produce a printed message on it. He then rubbed his thumb across it, freezing it. "I'll tell you where to go. You take this with you, and it may get you a job."

Raych took the card and glanced at it. The signals seemed to fluoresce, but Raych could not read them. He looked at the other out of the corner of his eye.

"What if they think I stole it?"

"It can't be stolen. It has my sign on it, and your name."

"What if they ask me your name?"

"They won't. —You say you want a job. There's your chance. I don't guarantee it, but there's your chance." He gave him another card, "This is where to go." Raych could read this one.

"Thank you," he mumbled.

The man made little dismissing gestures with his hand.

Raych rose, and left—and wondered what he was getting into.

13.

Up and down. Up and down. Up and down.

Gleb Andorin watched Gambol Deen Namarti trudging up and down.

Namarti was obviously unable to sit still under the driving force of the violence of his passion.

Andorin thought: He's not the brightest man in the Empire, or even in the movement, not the shrewdest, certainly not the most capable of rational thought. He has to be held down constantly—but he's driven as none of the rest of us are. We would give up, let go, but *he* won't. Push, pull, prod, kick. —Well, maybe we need someone like that. We *must* have someone like that or nothing will ever happen.

Namarti stopped as though he felt Andorin's eyes boring into his back. He turned about and said, "If you're going to lecture me again on Kaspalov, don't bother."

Andorin shrugged lightly. "Why bother lecturing? The deed is done. The harm, if any, has come to pass."

"What harm, Andorin? What harm? If I had not done it, *then* we would have been harmed. The man was on the edge of being a traitor. Within a month, he would have gone running—"

"I know. I was there. I heard what he said."

"Then you understand there was no choice. No choice. You don't think I liked to have an old comrade killed, do you? I had no choice."

"Very well. You had no choice."

Namarti resumed his tramping, then turned again. "Andorin, do you believe in gods?"

Andorin stared. "In what?"

"In gods."

"I never heard the word. What is it?"

Namarti said, "It's not Galactic Standard. Supernatural influences —how's that?"

"Oh, supernatural influences. Why didn't you say so? No, I don't believe in that sort of thing. By definition, something is supernatural if it exists outside the laws of nature and nothing exists outside the laws of nature. Are you turning mystic?" Andorin asked it as though he were joking, but his eyes narrowed in sudden concern.

Namarti stared him down. Those blazing eyes of his could stare anyone down. "Don't be a fool. I've been reading about it. Trillions of people believe in supernatural influences."

"I know," said Andorin. "They always have."

"They've done so since before the beginning of history. The word 'gods' is of unknown origin. It is, apparently, a hangover from some primeval language no trace of which any longer exists, except that word. —Do you know how many different varieties of beliefs there are in various kinds of gods?"

"Approximately as many as the varieties of fools among the galactic population, I should say."

Namarti ignored that. "Some people think the word dates back to the time when all humanity existed on but a single world."

"Itself a mythological concept. That's just as lunatic as the notion of supernatural influences. There never was one original human world."

"There would have to be, Andorin," said Namarti, annoyed. "Human beings can't have evolved on different worlds and ended as a single species."

"Even so, there's no *effective* human world. It can't be located, it can't be defined, so it can't be spoken of sensibly, so it *effectively* doesn't exist."

"These gods," said Namarti, continuing to follow his own line of thought, "are supposed to protect humanity and keep it safe, or at least to care for those portions of humanity that know how to make use of the gods. At a time when there was only one human world, it makes sense to suppose they would be particularly interested in caring for that one tiny world with a few people. They would care for such a world as though they were big brothers, or parents."

"Very nice of them. I'd like to see them try to handle the entire Empire."

"What if they could? What if they were infinite?"

"What if the sun were frozen? What's the use of 'what if'?"

"I'm just speculating. Just thinking. Haven't you ever let your mind wander freely? Do you always keep everything on a leash?"

"I should imagine that's the safest way, keeping it on a leash. What does your wandering mind tell you, Chief?"

Namarti's eyes flashed at the other as though he suspected sarcasm, but Andorin's face remained good-natured and blank.

Namarti said, "What my mind is telling me is this—if there are gods, they must be on our side."

"Wonderful, if true. Where's the evidence?"

"Evidence? Without the gods, it would just be a coincidence, I suppose, but a very useful one." Suddenly, Namarti yawned and sat down, looking exhausted.

Good, thought Andorin. His galloping mind has finally wound itself down and he may talk sense now.

"This matter of internal breakdown of the infrastructure—" said Namarti, his voice distinctly lower.

Andorin interrupted. "You know, Chief, Kaspalov was not entirely wrong about this. The longer we keep it up, the greater the chance that Imperial forces will discover the cause. The whole program must, sooner or later, explode in our faces."

"Not yet. So far, everything is exploding in the Imperial face. The unrest on Trantor is something I can feel." He raised his hands, rubbing his fingers together. "I can feel it. And we *are* almost through. We are ready for the next step."

Andorin smiled humorlessly. "I'm not asking for details, Chief. Kaspalov did, and you had him eliminated. I am not Kaspalov."

"It's precisely because you're not Kaspalov that I can tell you. And because I know something now I didn't then."

"I presume," said Andorin, only half-believing what he was saying, "that you intend a strike on the Imperial Palace grounds themselves."

Namarti looked up. "Of course. What else is there to do? The problem, however, is how to penetrate the grounds effectively. I have my sources of information there, but they are only spies. I'll need men of action on the spot."

"To get men of action into the most heavily guarded region in all the galaxy will not be easy."

"Of course not. That's what has been giving me an unbearable headache till now—and then the gods intervened."

Andorin said gently (it was taking all his self-restraint to keep him from showing his disgust), "I don't think we need a metaphysical discussion. What has happened—leaving the gods to one side?"

"My information is that his Gracious and ever to be Beloved Emperor, Cleon I, has decided to appoint a new Chief Gardener. This is the first new appointee in nearly a quarter of a century."

"And if so?"

"Do you see no significance?"

Andorin thought a bit. "I am not a favorite of your gods. I don't see any significance."

"If you have a new Chief Gardener, Andorin, the situation is the same as having a new administrator of any other type—the same as if you had a new First Minister, or a new Emperor. The new Chief Gardener will certainly want his own staff. He will force into retirement what he considers dead wood and will hire younger gardeners by the hundreds."

"That's possible."

"It's more than possible. It's certain. Exactly that happened when the present Chief Gardener was appointed, and the same when his predecessor was appointed, and so on. Hundreds of strangers from the Outer Worlds—"

"Why from the Outer Worlds?"

"Use your brains, if you have any, Andorin. What do Trantorians know about gardening when they've lived under domes all their lives, tending potted plants, zoos, and carefully arranged crops of grains and fruit-trees? What do they know about life in the wild?"

"Ahhh. Now I understand."

"So there will be these strangers flooding the grounds. They will be carefully checked, I presume, but they won't be as tightly screened as they would be if they were Trantorians. And that means, surely, that we should be able to supply just a few of our own people with false identification, and get them inside. Even if some are screened out, a few might make it—a few *must* make it. Our people will enter despite the super-tight security established since the failed coup in the early days of Seldon's First Ministry." (He virtually spat the name, "Seldon," as he always did.) "We'll finally have our chance."

Now it was Andorin who felt dizzy, as if he'd fallen into a spinning vortex. "It seems odd for me to say so, Chief, but there is something to this gods business after all, because I have been waiting to tell you something that, I now see, fits in perfectly."

Namarti stared at the other suspiciously and looked about the room as though he suddenly feared a breach of security. But such fear was groundless. The room was located deep in an old-fashioned residential complex, and was well-shielded. No one could overhear and no one, even with detailed directions, could find it easily—nor get through the layers of protection provided by loyal members of the organization.

Namarti said, "What are you talking about?"

"I've found a man for you. A young man—very naïve. A quite likeable fellow, the kind you feel you can trust as soon as you see him. He's got an open face, wide-open eyes; he's lived in Dahl; he's an enthusiast for equality; he thinks Joranum was the greatest thing since Mycogenian candy; and I'm sure we can easily talk him into doing anything for the cause."

"For the cause?" said Namarti, whose suspicions were not in the least alleviated. "Is he one of us?"

"Actually, he's not one of anything. He's got some vague notions in his head that Joranum wanted Sector Equality."

"That was his lure. Sure."

"It's ours, too, but the kid *believes* it. He talks equality and popular participation in government. He even mentioned democracy."

Namarti snickered. "In twenty thousand years, democracy has never been used for very long without falling apart."

"Yes, but that's not our concern. It's what drives the young man and I tell you, Chief, I knew we had our tool just about the moment I saw him, but I didn't know how we could possibly use him. Now I know. We can get him onto the Imperial Palace grounds as a gardener."

"How? Does he know anything about gardening?"

"No, I'm sure he doesn't. He's never worked at anything but unskilled labor. He's operating a hauler right now, and I think that he had to be taught how to do that. Still, if we can get him in as a gardener's helper, if he just knows how to hold a pair of shears, then we've got it."

"Got what?"

"Got someone who can approach anyone we wish, and do so without raising the flutter of a suspicion, and get close enough to strike. I'm telling you he simply exudes a kind of honorable stupidity, a kind of foolish virtue, that inspires confidence."

"And he'll do what we tell him to do?"

"Absolutely."

"How did you meet this person?"

"It wasn't I. It was Manella who really spotted him."

"Who?"

"Manella. Manella Dubanqua."

"Oh. That friend of yours." Namarti's face twisted into a look of prissy disapproval.

"She's the friend of many people," said Andorin tolerantly. "That's one of the things that makes her so useful. She can weigh a man quickly and with very little to go on. She talked to this fellow, because he attracted her at sight, and I assure you Manella is not one to be attracted by anything other than the bottom-line, so you see this man is rather unusual. She talked to this fellow—his name is Planchet, by the way—and then told me 'I have a live one for you, Gleb.'—I'll trust her on the matter of live ones any day."

Namarti said slyly, "And what do you think this wonderful tool of yours would do once he had the run of the grounds, eh, Andorin?"

Andorin took a deep breath. "What else? If we do everything right, he will dispose of our dear Emperor, Cleon, First of that Name, for us."

Namarti's face blazed into anger. "What? Are you mad? Why should we want to kill Cleon? He's our hold on the government. He's the façade behind which we can rule. He's our passport to legitimacy. Where are your brains? We need him as a figurehead. He won't interfere with us and we'll be stronger for his existence."

Andorin's fair face turned blotchy red, and his good humor finally exploded. "What do you have in mind, then? What are you planning? I'm getting tired of always having to second-guess."

Namarti raised his hand. "All right. All right. Calm down. I meant no harm. But think a bit, will you? Who destroyed Joranum? Who destroyed our hopes ten years ago? It was that mathematician. And it is he who rules the Empire now with his idiotic talk about Psychohistory. Cleon is nothing. It is Hari Seldon we must destroy. It is Hari Seldon whom I've been turning into an object of ridicule with these constant breakdowns. The miseries they entail are placed at *his* doorstep. It is all being interpreted as *his* inefficiency, *his* incapacity." There was a trace of spittle in the corners of Namarti's mouth. "When he's cut down there will be a cheer from the Empire that will drown out every holovision report for hours. It won't even matter if they know who did it." He raised his hand and let it drop, as if he were plunging a knife into someone's heart. "We will be looked upon as heroes of the Empire, as saviors. —Eh? Eh? Do you think your youngster can cut down Hari Seldon?"

Andorin had recovered equanimity, at least outwardly.

"I'm sure he would," he said, with forced lightness."For Cleon, he might have some respect; the Emperor has a mystical aura about him, as you know." (He stressed the "you" faintly and Namarti scowled.) "He would have not such feelings about Seldon."

Inwardly, however, Andorin was furious. This was not what he wanted. He was being betrayed.

14.

Manella brushed the hair out of her eyes and smiled up at Raych. "I told you it needn't cost much in the way of money."

Raych blinked and scratched at his bare shoulder. "Actually, it didn't cost me nothing—unless you ask for something now."

She shrugged and smiled rather impishly, "Why should I?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"Because I'm allowed to take my own pleasure sometimes."

"With me?"

"There's no one else."

There was a long pause and then Manella said soothingly, "Besides, you don't have much money anyway. How's the job?"

Raych said, "Ain't much, but better than nothing. Lots better. Did you tell that guy to get me one?"

Manella shook her head slowly. "You mean Gleb Andorin? I didn't tell him to do anything. I just said he might be interested in you."

"Is he going to be annoyed because you and I—"

"Why should he? None of *his* business and none of *yours* if he does, either."

"What's he do? I mean what does he work at?"

"I don't think he works at anything. He's got money. He's a relative of the old mayors."

"Of Wye?"

"Right. He doesn't like the government. None of those old Mayor-people do. He says Cleon should—"

She stopped suddenly, and said, "I'm talking too much. Don't you go repeating anything I say."

"Me? I ain't heard you say nothing at all. And I ain't going to."

"All right."

"But about this guy, Andorin. Is he high up in Joranumite business? Is he an important guy there?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Don't he ever talk about that kind of stuff?"

"Not to me."

"Oh," said Raych, trying not to sound annoyed.

She looked at him shrewdly. "Why are you so interested?"

"I want to get in with them. I figure I'll get higher up that way. Better job. More money. You know."

"Maybe Andorin will help you. He likes you. I know that much."

"Could you make him like me more?"

"I can try. I don't know why he shouldn't. *I* like you. I like you more than I like him."

"Thank you, Manella. I like you, too. —A lot." He ran his hand down the side of her body and wished ardently that he could concentrate more on her and less on his task.

15.

"Gleb Andorin," said Hari Seldon wearily, rubbing his eyes.

"And who is he?" asked Dors Venabili, her mood as black as it had been every day since Raych had left.

"Until a few days ago, I never heard of him," said Seldon. "That's the trouble with trying to run a world of forty billion people. You never hear of anyone except for the few who obtrude themselves on your notice. With all the computerized information in the world, Trantor remains a planet of anonymities. We can drag up people with their serial numbers and their statistics, but *whom* do we drag up? Add twenty-five million Outer Worlds and the wonder is that the Galactic Empire has remained a working phenomenon for all these millennia. Frankly, I think it has existed only because it very largely runs itself. And now it is finally running down."

"So much for philosophizing, Hari," said Venabili. "Who is this Andorin?"

"Someone I admit I *ought* to have known about. I managed to cajole the Imperial Guard into calling up their files on him. He's a member of the Wyan mayoralty family; the most prominent member, in fact, so prominent that the I.G. has kept tabs on him. They think he has ambitions but is too much of a playboy to do anything about them."

"And is he involved with the Joranumites?"

Seldon made an uncertain gesture. "I'm under the impression that the I.G. knows nothing about the Joranumites. That means that the Joranumites don't exist, or that, if they do, they are of no importance. It may also mean that the I.G. just isn't interested. Nor is there any way in which I can force them to be interested; I'm only thankful they give me any information at all. And I am the First Minister."

"Is it possible that you're not a very good First Minister?" said Venabili dryly.

"That's more than possible. It's been generations since there's been one less suited to the job than I. But that has nothing to do with the Imperial Guard. Despite their name, they're a totally independent arm of the government. I doubt that Cleon himself knows much about them, though, in theory, they're supposed to report directly to him. Believe me, if we only knew more about the I.G. we'd be trying to stick them into our psychohistorical equations, such as they are."

"Are they on our side, at least?"

"I believe so, but I can't swear to it."

"And why are you interested in this what's-his-name?"

"Gleb Andorin. Because I received a roundabout message from Raych."

Venabili's eyes flashed. "You didn't tell me. Is he all right?"

"As far as I know, but I hope he doesn't try any further messages. If he's caught communicating, he *won't* be all right. In any case, he has made contact with Andorin."

"And the Joranumites, too?"

"I don't think so. It would sound unlikely, for the connection is not something that would make sense. The Joranumite movement is predominantly lower-class; a proletarian movement, so to speak. And Andorin is an aristocrat of aristocrats. What would he be doing with the Joranumites?"

"If he's of the Wyan mayoralty family, he might aspire to the Imperial throne, might he not?"

"They've been aspiring for generations. You remember Rashelle, I trust. She was his aunt."

"Then he might be using the Joranumites as a stepping-stone, don't you think?"

"If they exist. And if they do, and if a stepping stone is what Andorin wants, I think he'd find himself playing a dangerous game. The Joranumites, if they exist, would have their own plans and a man like Andorin may find he's simply riding a greti—"

"What's a greti?"

"Some extinct animal of a ferocious type, I think. It's just a proverbial phrase, back on Helicon. If you ride a greti, you find you can't get off, for then it will eat you."

Seldon paused. "One more thing. Raych seems to be involved with a woman who knows Andorin and through whom, he thinks, he may get important information. I'm telling you this now so that you won't accuse me, afterward, of keeping anything from you."

Venabili frowned. "A woman?"

"One, I gather, who knows a great many men who will talk to her unwisely, sometimes, under intimate circumstances."

"One of those." Her frown deepened. "I don't like the thought of Raych—"

"Come, come. Raych is thirty years old and undoubtedly has much experience. You can leave this woman—or any woman, I think—safely to Raych's good sense." He turned toward Venabili with a look so worn, so weary, as he said, "Do you think I like this? Do you think I like any of this?"

And Venabili could find nothing to say.

16.

Gambol Deen Namarti was not, at even the best of times, noted for his politeness and suavity, and the approaching climax of a decade of planning had left him the sourer of disposition.

He rose from his chair in some agitation as he said, "You've taken your time in getting here, Andorin."

Andorin shrugged. "But I'm here now."

"And this young man of yours—this remarkable tool that you're touting. Where is he?"

"He'll be here eventually."

"Why not now?"

Andorin's rather handsome head seemed to sink a bit as though, for a moment, he were lost in thought or coming to a decision, and then he said abruptly. "I don't want to bring him till I know where I stand."

"What does that mean?"

"Simple words in Galactic Standard. How long has it been your aim to get rid of Hari Seldon?"

"Always! Always! Is that so hard to understand? We deserve revenge for what he did to JoJo. Even if he hadn't done that, since he's the First Minister, we'd have to put him out of the way."

"But it's Cleon—*Cleon*—who must be brought down. If not only he, then at least he in addition to Seldon."

"Why does a figurehead concern you?"

"You weren't born yesterday. I've never had to explain my part in this because you're not so ignorant a fool as not to know. What can I possibly care about your plans if they don't include a replacement on the throne?"

Namarti laughed. "Of course. I've known for a long time that you look upon me as your footstool; your way of climbing up to the Imperial throne."

"Would you expect anything else?"

"Not at all. I will do the planning, take the chances, and then, when all is quite done, you gather in the reward. It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does make sense, for the reward will be yours, too. Won't you become the First Minister? Won't you be able to count on the full support of a new Emperor, one who is filled with gratitude? Won't I be" (and his face twisted with irony as he spat out the words) "the new figurehead?"

"Is that what you plan to be? A figurehead?"

"I plan to be the Emperor. I supplied money when you had none. I supplied the cadre when you had none. I supplied the respectability you needed to build a large organization here in Wye. I can still withdraw everything I've brought in."

"I don't think so."

"Do you want to risk it? Don't think you can treat me as you treated Kaspalov, either. If anything happens to me, Wye will become uninhabitable for you and yours, and you will find that no other sector will supply you with what you need."

Namarti sighed, "Then you insist on having the Emperor killed."

"I didn't say 'killed.' I said brought down. The details I leave to you." This last was accompanied by an almost dismissive wave of the hand, a flick of the wrist, as if he were already sitting on the Imperial throne.

"And then you'll be Emperor?"

"Yes."

"No, you won't. You'll be dead—and not at my hands, either. Andorin, let me teach you some of the facts of life. If Cleon is killed, then the matter of the succession comes up and, to avoid civil war, the Imperial Guard will at once kill every member of the Wyan mayoral family they can find; you first of all. On the other hand, if only the First Minister is killed, you will be safe."

"Why?"

"A First Minister is only a First Minister. They come and go. It is possible that Cleon himself may have grown tired of him and arranged the killing. Certainly, we would see to it that rumors of this sort spread.

The I.G. would hesitate and would give us a chance to put the new government into place. Indeed, it is quite possible that they would themselves be grateful for the end of Seldon."

"And with the new government in place, what am I to do? Keep on waiting? Forever?"

"No. Once I'm First Minister, there will be ways of dealing with Cleon. I may even be able to do something with the Imperial Guard and use them as my instruments. I will then manage to find some safe way of getting rid of Cleon, and replacing him with you."

Andorin burst out, "Why should you?"

Namarti said, "What do you mean, why should I?"

"You have a personal grudge against Seldon. Once he is gone, why should you run the unnecessary risks at the highest level? You will make your peace with Cleon and I will have to retire to my crumbling estate and my impossible dreams. And perhaps to play it safe, you will have me killed."

Namarti said, "No! Cleon was born to the throne. He comes from several generations of Emperors—the proud Entun dynasty. He would be very difficult to handle, a plague. You, on the other hand, would come to the throne as a member of a new dynasty, without any strong ties to tradition, for the previous Wyan Emperors were, you will admit, totally undistinguished. You will be seated on a shaky throne and will need someone to support you—*me*. And I will need someone who is dependent upon me and whom I can therefore handle—*you.*—Come, Andorin, ours is not a marriage of love, which fades in a year; it is a marriage of convenience which can last life-long. Let us trust each other."

"You swear I will be Emperor."

"What good would swearing do if you couldn't trust my word? Let us say I would find you an extraordinarily useful Emperor, and I would want you to replace Cleon as soon as that can safely be managed. Now introduce me to this man whom you think will be the perfect tool for your purposes."

"Very well. And remember what makes him different. I have studied him. He's a not-very-bright idealist. He will do what he's told, unconcerned by danger, unconcerned by second thoughts. And he exudes a kind of trustworthiness so that his victim will trust him even if he has a blaster in his hand."

"'I find that impossible to believe."

"Wait till you meet him," said Andorin.

17.

Raych kept his eyes down. He had taken a quick look at Namarti and it was all he needed. He had met the man ten years before, when Raych had been sent to lure JoJo Joranum to his destruction, and one look was more than enough.

Namarti had changed little in ten years. Anger and hatred were still the dominant characteristics one could see in him—or that Raych could see in him, at any rate, for he realized he was not an impartial witness—and those seemed to have marinated him into leathery permanence. His face was a trifle more gaunt; his hair was flecked with gray; but his thin-lipped mouth was set in the same harsh line and his dark eyes were as brilliantly dangerous as ever.

That was enough, and Raych kept his eyes averted. Namarti, he felt, was not one of those who would take to someone who could stare him straight in the face.

Namarti seemed to devour Raych with his own eyes, but the slight sneer his face always seemed to wear remained.

He turned to Andorin, who stood uneasily to one side, and said, quite as though the subject of conversation were not present, "This is the man, then."

Andorin nodded and his lips moved in a soundless, "Yes, Chief."

Namarti said to Raych abruptly. "Your name."

"Planchet, sir."

"You believe in our cause?"

"Yes, sir." He spoke carefully, in accordance with Andorin's instructions. "I am a democrat and want greater participation of the people in the governmental process."

Namarti's eyes flicked in Andorin's direction. "A speech-maker."

He looked back at Raych. "Are you willing to undertake risks for the cause?"

"Any risk, sir."

"You will do as you are told? No questions? No hanging back?"

"I will follow orders."

"Do you know anything about gardening?"

Raych hesitated. "No, sir."

"You're a Trantorian, then? Born under the dome?"

"I was born in Millimaru, sir, and I was brought up in Dahl."

"Very well," said Namarti. Then, to Andorin. "Take him out and deliver him, temporarily, to the men waiting there. They will take good care of him. Then come back, Andorin, I want to speak to you."

When Andorin returned, a profound change had come over Namarti. His eyes were glittering and his mouth was twisted into a feral grin.

"Andorin," he said, "the gods we spoke of the other day are with us to an extent I couldn't have imagined."

"I told you the man was suitable for our purposes."

"Far more suitable than you think. You know, of course, the tale of how Hari Seldon—our revered First Minister—sent his son, or foster-son, rather, to see Joranum, and to set the trap into which Joranum, against my advice, fell."

"Yes," said Andorin, nodding wearily, "I know the story." He said it with the air of one who knew the story entirely too well.

"I saw that boy only that once, but his face is burned into my brain.

Do you suppose that ten years' passage, and false heels, and a shaved mustache could fool me? That Planchet of yours is Raych, the foster-son of Hari Seldon."

Andorin paled and, for a moment, he held his breath. He said, "Are you sure of that, Chief?"

"As sure as I am that you're standing here in front of me and that you have introduced an enemy into our midst."

"I had no idea—"

"Don't get nervous," said Namarti. "I consider it the best thing you have ever done in your idle, aristocratic life. You have played the rôle that the gods have marked out for you. If I had not known who he was, he might have fulfilled the function for which he was undoubtedly intended, to be a spy in our midst and an informant of our most secret plans. But since I know who he is, it won't work that way. Instead, we now have *everything*." Namarti rubbed his hands together in delight and, haltingly, as if he realized how far out of character for him it was, he smiled—and laughed.

18.

Manella said thoughtfully, "I guess I won't be seeing you anymore, Planchet."

Raych was drying himself after his shower. "Why not?"

"Gleb Andorin doesn't want me to."

"Why not?"

Manella shrugged her smooth shoulders. "He says you have important work to do and no more time to fool around. Maybe he means you'll get a better job."

Raych stiffened. "What kind of work? Did he mention anything in particular?"

"No, but he said he would be going to the Imperial sector."

"Did he? Does he often tell you things like that?"

"You know how it is, Planchet. When a fellow's in bed with you, he talks a lot."

"I know," said Raych, who was himself careful not to. "What else does he say?"

"Why do you ask?" She frowned a bit. "He always asks about you, too. I noticed that about men. They're curious about each other. Why is that, do you suppose?"

"What do you tell him about me?"

"Not much. Just you're a nice kid and you're a very decent sort. Naturally, I don't tell him I like you better than I like him. That would hurt his feelings—and it might hurt me, too."

Raych was getting dressed. "So it's good-bye, then."

"For a while, I suppose. Gleb may change his mind. Of course, I'd like to go to the Imperial sector, if he'd take me. I've never been there."

Raych almost slipped, but he managed to cough, then said, "I've never been there, either."

"It's got the biggest buildings and the nicest places and the fanciest restaurants, and that's where the rich people live. I'd like to meet some rich people."

Raych said, "I suppose there's not much to be gotten out of a person like me."

"You're all right. You can't think of money all the time, but, by the same token, you've got to think of it some of the time. Especially since I think Gleb is getting tired of me."

Raych felt compelled to say, "No one could get tired of you," and then found, a little to his own confusion, that he meant it.

Manella said, "That's what men always say, but you'd be surprised. Anyway, it's been good, you and I, Planchet. Take care of yourself and, who knows, we may see each other again."

Raych nodded and found himself at a loss for words. There was no way in which he could say or do anything to express his feelings.

With a wrench, he turned his mind in other directions. He had to find out what the Namarti people were planning. If they were separating him from Manella, the crisis must be rapidly approaching. All he had to go on was that queer question about gardening.

Nor could he get any further information back to Seldon. He had been kept under close scrutiny since his meeting with Namarti; and all avenues of communication were cut off—surely another indication of an approaching crisis.

But if he were to find out what was going on only after it was done, and if he could communicate the news only after it was no longer news, he would have failed.

19.

Hari Seldon was not having a good day. He had not heard from Raych since his first communiqué; he had no idea what was happening.

Aside from his natural concern for Raych's safety (surely he would hear if something really bad had happened) there was his uneasiness over what might be planned.

It would have to be subtle. A direct attack on the Palace itself was totally out of the question. Security there was far too tight. But if so, when else could be planned that would be sufficiently effective?

The whole thing was keeping him awake at night and distracted by day.

The signal-light flashed.

"First Minister. Your two o'clock appointment, sir—"

"What two o'clock appointment is this?"

"The gardener, Mandell Gruber. He has the necessary certification."

Seldon remembered. "Yes. Send him in."

This was no time to see Gruber, but he had agreed to it in a moment of weakness—the man had seemed distraught. A First Minister should not have moments of weakness, but Seldon had been Seldon long before he had become First Minister.

"Come in, Gruber," he said, kindly.

Gruber stood before him, head ducking mechanically, eyes darting this way and that. Seldon was quite certain the gardener had never been in any room as magnificent as this one, and he had the bitter urge to say: Do you like it? Please take it. *I* don't want it.

But he only said, "What is it, Gruber? Why are you so unhappy?"

There was no immediate answer; Gruber merely smiled vacantly.

Seldon said, "Sit down, man. Right there in that chair."

"Oh, no, First Minister. It would not be fitting. I'll get it dirty."

"If you do, it will be easy to clean. Do as I say. —Good! Now just sit there a minute or two and gather your thoughts. Then, when you are ready, tell me what's the matter."

Gruber sat silent for a moment, then the words came out in a panting rush. "First Minister. It is Chief Gardener I am to be. The blessed Emperor himself told me so."

"Yes, I have heard of that, but that surely isn't what is troubling you. Your new post is a matter of congratulations and I do congratulate you. I may even have contributed to it, Gruber. I have never forgotten your bravery at the time they tried to kill me, and you can be sure I mentioned it to His Imperial Majesty. It is a suitable reward, Gruber, and you would deserve the promotion in any case for it is quite clear from your record that you are fully qualified for the post. So now that that's out of the way, tell me what is troubling you."

"First Minister, it is the very post and promotion that is troubling me. It is something I cannot manage for I am not qualified."

"We are convinced you are."

Gruber grew agitated. "And is it in an office I will have to sit? I can't sit in an office. I could not go out in the open air and work with the plants and animals. I would be in prison, First Minister."

Seldon's eyes opened wide. "No such thing, Gruber. You needn't stay in the office longer than you have to. You could wander about the grounds freely, supervising everything. You will have all the outdoors you want and you will merely spare yourself the hard work."

"I want the hard work, First Minister, and it's no chance at all they will let me come out of the office. I have watched the present Chief Gardener. He couldn't leave his office, though he wanted to ever so. There is too much administration, too much bookkeeping. Sure, if he wants to know what is going on, we must go to his office to tell him. He watches things on holovision" (this, with infinite contempt) "as though you can tell anything about growing, living things from images. It is not for me, First Minister."

"Come, Gruber, be a man. It's not all that bad. You'll get used to it. You'll work your way in slowly."

Gruber shook his head. "First off—at the very first—I will have to deal with the new gardeners. I'll be buried." Then, with sudden energy. "It is a job I do not want and must not have, First Minister."

"Right now, Gruber, perhaps you don't want the job, but you are not alone. I'll tell you that right now I wish I were not First Minister. This job is too much for me. I even have a notion that there are times when the Emperor himself is tired of his Imperial robes. We're all in this galaxy to do our work, and the work isn't always pleasant."

"I understand that, First Minister, but the Emperor must be Emperor, for he was born to that. And you must be First Minister for there is no one else who can do the job. But in my case, it is just Chief Gardener we are ruminating upon. There are fifty gardeners in the place who could do it as well as I could and who wouldn't mind the office. You say that you spoke to the Emperor about how I tried to help you. Can't you speak to him again, and explain that if he wants to reward me for what I did, he can leave me as I am?"

Seldon leaned back in his chair and said solemnly, "Gruber, I would do that for you if I could, but I've got to explain something to you and I can only hope that you will understand it. The Emperor, in theory, is absolute ruler of the Empire. In actual fact, there is very little he can do. I run the Empire. I run the Empire right now much more than he does and there is very little I can do, too. There are millions and billions of people at all levels of government, all making decisions, all making mistakes, some acting wisely and heroically, some acting foolishly and thievishly. There's no controlling them. Do you understand me, Gruber?"

"I do, but what has this to do with my case?"

"Because there is only one place where the Emperor is really absolute ruler, and that is over the Imperial grounds themselves. Here his word is law and the layers of officials beneath him are few enough for him to handle. For him to be asked to rescind a decision he has made in connection with the Imperial Palace grounds would be to invade the only area which he would consider inviolate. If I were to say, 'Take back your decision on Gruber, Your Imperial Majesty' he would be much more likely to relieve me of my duties than to take back his decision. That might be a good thing for me, but it wouldn't help you any."

Gruber said, "Does that mean there's no way things can be changed?"

"That's exactly what it means. But don't worry, Gruber, I'll help you all I can. I'm sorry. But now I have really spent all the time on you that I am able to spare."

Gruber rose to his feet. In his hands he twisted his green gardening cap. There was more than a suspicion of tears in his eyes. "Thank you, First Minister. I know you would like to help. You're—you're a good man, First Minister."

He turned and left, sorrowing.

Seldon looked after him thoughtfully, and shook his head. Multiply Gruber's woes by a quadrillion and you would have the woes of all the people of the twenty-five million worlds of the Empire, and how was he, Seldon, to work out salvation for all of them, when he was helpless to solve the problem of one single man who had come to him for help?

Psychohistory could not save one man. Could it save a quadrillion?

He shook his head again, and checked the nature and time of his next appointment, and then, suddenly, he stiffened. He shouted into his communications wire in sudden wild abandon, quite unlike his usually strict control. "Get that gardener back. Get him back right now."

20.

"What's this about new gardeners?" exclaimed Seldon. This time, he did not ask Gruber to sit down.

Gruber's eyes blinked rapidly. He was in a panic at having been recalled so unexpectedly. "New gardeners?" he stammered.

"You said 'all the new gardeners.' Those were your words. What new gardeners?"

Gruber was astonished. "Sure, if there is a new Chief Gardener, there will be new gardeners. It is the custom."

"I have never heard of this."

"The last time we had a change of Chief Gardeners, you were not First Minister. It is likely you were not even on Trantor."

"But what's it all about?"

"Well, gardeners are never discharged. Some die. Some grow too old and are pensioned off and replaced. Still, by the time a new Chief Gardener is ready for his duties, at least half the staff is aged and beyond their best years. They are all pensioned off, generously, and new gardeners are brought in."

"For youth."

"Partly, and partly because by that time there are usually new plans for the gardens, and it is new ideas and new schemes we must have. There are almost five hundred square kilometers in the gardens and parklands, and it usually takes some years to reorganize it, and it is myself who will have to supervise it all. Please, First Minister," Gruber was gasping. "Surely, a clever man like your own self can find a way to change the blessed Emperor's mind."

Seldon paid no attention. His forehead was creased in concentration. "Where do the new gardeners come from?"

"There are examinations on all the worlds—there are always people waiting to serve as replacements. They'll be coming in by the hundreds in a dozen batches. It will take me a year, at the least—"

"From where do they come? From where?"

"From any of a million worlds. We want a variety of horticultural knowledge. Any citizen of the Empire can qualify."

"From Trantor, too?"

"No, not from Trantor. There is no one from Trantor in the gardens." His voice grew contemptuous. "You can't get a gardener out of Trantor.

The parks they have here under the dome aren't gardens. They are potted plants, and the animals are in cages. Trantorians, poor specimens that they are, know nothing about open air, free water, and the true balance of nature."

"All right, Gruber. I will now give you a job. It will be up to you to get me the names of every new gardener scheduled to arrive over the coming weeks. Everything about them. Name. World. Identification number. Education. Experience. Everything. I want it here on my desk just as quickly as possible. I'm going to send people to help you. People with machines. What kind of a computer do you use?"

"Only a simple one for keeping track of plantings and species and things like that."

"All right. The people I send will be able to do anything you can't do. I can't tell you how important this is."

"If I should do this—"

"Gruber, this is not the time to make bargains. Fail me, and you will not be Chief Gardener. Instead, you will be discharged without a pension."

Alone again, he barked into his communications wire, "Cancel all appointments for the rest of the afternoon."

He then let his body flop in his chair, feeling every bit of his fifty years, and more, feeling his headache worsen. For years, for decades, security had been built about the Imperial Palace grounds, thicker, more solid, more impenetrable, as each new layer and each new device was added.

—And every once in a while, hordes of strangers were let into the grounds. No questions asked, probably, but one: Can you garden?

The stupidity involved was too colossal to grasp.

And he had barely caught it in time. Or had he? Was he, even now, too late?

21.

Gleb Andorin gazed at Namarti through half-closed eyes. He had never liked the man, but there were times when he liked him less than he usually did, and this was one of those times. Why should Andorin, a Wyan of royal birth (that's what it amounted to, after all), have to work with this parvenu, this near-psychotic paranoid?

Andorin knew why, and he had to endure, even when Namarti was once again in the process of telling the story of how he had built up the Party during a period of ten years to its present pitch of perfection. Did he tell this to everyone, over and over? Or was it just Andorin who was his chosen vessel for the receipt of it?

Namarti's face seemed to shine with glee as he said in an odd singsong, as though it were a matter of rote, "—so year after year, I worked on those lines, even through hopelessness and uselessness, building an organization, chipping away at confidence in the government, creating and intensifying dissatisfaction. When there was the banking crisis and the week of the moratorium, I—"

He paused suddenly. "I've told you this many times, and you're sick of hearing it, aren't you?"

Andorin's lips twitched in a brief, dry smile. Namarti was not such an idiot as not to know the bore he was; he just couldn't help it. Andorin said, "You've told me this many times." He allowed the remainder of the question to hang in the air unanswered. The answer, after all, was an obvious affirmative. There was no need to face him with it.

A slight flush crossed Namarti's sallow face. He said, "But it could have gone on forever, the building, the chipping, without ever coming to a point, if I hadn't had the proper tool in my hands. And without any effort on my part, the tool came to me."

"The gods brought you Planchet," said Andorin neutrally.

"You're right. There will be a group of gardeners entering the Imperial Palace grounds soon." He paused and seemed to savor the thought. "Men and women. Enough to serve as a mask for the handful of our operatives who will accompany them. Among them will be you—and Planchet. And what will make you and Planchet unusual is that you will be carrying blasters."

"Surely," said Andorin, with deliberate malice behind a polite expression, "we'll be stopped at the gates and held for questioning. Bringing an illicit blaster onto the Palace grounds—"

"You won't be stopped," said Namarti, missing the malice. "You won't be searched. That's been arranged. You will all be greeted as a matter of course by some Palace official. I don't know who would ordinarily be in charge of that task—the Third Assistant Chamberlain in Charge of Grass and Leaves, for all I know, but in this case, it will be Seldon himself. The great mathematician will hurry out to greet the new gardeners and welcome them to the grounds."

"You're sure of that, I suppose."

"Of course I am. It's all been arranged. He will learn, at more or less the last minute, that his son is among those listed as new gardeners, and it will be impossible for him to refrain from coming out to see him. And when Seldon appears, Planchet will raise his blaster. Our people will raise the cry of 'Treason.' In the confusion and hurly-burly, Planchet will kill Seldon, and you will kill Planchet. You will then drop your blaster and leave. There are those who will help you leave. It's been arranged."

"Is it absolutely necessary to kill Planchet?"

Namarti frowned. "Why? Do you object to one killing and not to another? When Planchet recovers, do you wish him to tell the authorities all he knows about us? Besides, this is a family feud we are arranging. Don't forget that Planchet is, in actual fact, Raych Seldon. It will look as though the two had fired simultaneously at each other, or as though Seldon had given orders that if his son made any hostile move, he was to be shot down. We will see to it that the family angle will be given full publicity. It will be reminiscent of the bad old days of the Bloody Emperor

Manowell. The people of Trantor will surely be repelled by the sheer wickedness of the deed. That, piled on top of all the inefficiencies and breakdowns they've been witnessing and living through, will raise the cry for a new government, and no one will be able to refuse them, least of all the Emperor. And then we'll step in."

"Just like that?"

"No, not just like that. I don't live in a dream world. There is likely to be some interim government, but it will fail. We'll see to it that it fails, and we'll come out in the open and revive the old Joranumite arguments that the Trantorians have never forgotten. And in time, in not too much time, I will be First Minister."

"And I?"

"Will eventually be the Emperor."

Andorin said, "The chance of all this working is small. —This is arranged. That is arranged. The other thing is arranged. All of it has to come together and mesh perfectly, or it will fail. Somewhere, someone is bound to mess up. It's an unacceptable risk."

"Unacceptable? For whom? For you?"

"Certainly. You expect me to make certain that Planchet will kill his father and you expect me then to kill Planchet. Why me? Aren't there tools worth less than I who might more easily be risked?"

"Yes, but to choose anyone else would make failure certain. Who but you has so much riding on this mission that there is no chance you will turn back in a fit of vapors at the last minute?"

"The risk is enormous."

"Isn't it worth it to you? You're playing for the Imperial throne."

"And what risk are you taking, Chief? You will remain here, quite comfortable, and wait to hear the news."

Namarti's lip curled. "What a fool you are, Andorin! What an Emperor you will make! Do you suppose I take no risk because I will be here? If the gambit fails, if the plot miscarries, if some of our people are taken, do you think they won't tell everything they know? If you were somehow caught, would you face the tender treatment of the Imperial Guard without ever telling them about me?

"And with a failed assassination attempt at hand, do you suppose they won't comb Trantor to find me? Do you suppose that in the end they will fail to find me? And when they do find me, what do you suppose I will have to face at their hands? —Risk? I run a worse risk than any of you, just sitting here doing nothing. It boils down to this, Andorin. Do you, or do you not, wish to be Emperor?"

Andorin said in a low voice, "I wish to be Emperor."

And so things were set in motion.

22.

Raych had no trouble seeing that he was being treated with special care. The whole group of would-be gardeners were now quartered in one of the hotels in the Imperial Sector, although not one of the prime hotels, of course.

They were an odd lot, from fifty different worlds, but Raych had little chance to speak to any of them. Andorin, without being too obvious about it, kept him apart from the others.

Raych wondered why. It depressed him. In fact, he had been feeling somewhat depressed since he had left Wye. It interfered with his thinking process and he fought it, but not with entire success.

Andorin was himself wearing rough clothes and was attempting to look like a workman. He would be playing the part of a gardener as a way of running the show—whatever the show might be.

Raych felt ashamed that he hadn't even had the chance to warn his father. They might be doing this for every Trantorian who had been pushed into the group, for all he knew, just as an extreme precaution. Raych estimated that there might be a dozen Trantorians among them, all of them Namarti's people, of course, men and women both.

What puzzled him was that Andorin treated him with what was almost affection. He monopolized him, insisted on having all his meals with him, treated him quite differently from the way in which he treated anyone else.

Could it be because they had shared Manella? Raych did not know enough about the mores of the Sector of Wye to be able to tell whether there might not be a polyandrish touch to their society. If two men shared a woman, did that make them in a way fraternal? Did it create a bond?

Raych had never heard of such a thing, but he knew better than to suppose he had a grasp of even a tiny fraction of the infinite subtleties of galactic societies, even of Trantorian societies.

But now that his mind had brought him back to Manella, he dwelled on her for a while. He missed her terribly, and it occurred to him that that might be the cause of his depression, though, to tell the truth, what he was feeling now, as he was finishing lunch with Andorin, was almost despair—though he could think of no cause for it.

Manella!

She had said she wanted to visit the Imperial Sector and, presumably, she could wheedle Andorin to her liking. He was desperate enough to ask a foolish question. "Mr. Andorin, I keep wondering if maybe you brought Ms. Dubanqua along with you, here to the Imperial Sector."

Andorin looked utterly astonished. Then he laughed gently. "Manella? Do you see her doing any gardening? Or even pretending she could? No, no, Manella is one of those women invented for our quiet moments. She has no function at all, otherwise." Then, "Why do you ask, Planchet?"

Raych shrugged. "I don't know. It's sort of dull around here. I sort of thought—" His voice trailed away.

Andorin watched him carefully. Finally, he said, "Surely, you're not of the opinion that it matters much which woman you are involved with?

I assure you it doesn't matter to her which man she's involved with. Once this is over, there will be other women. Plenty of them."

"When will this be over?"

"Soon. And you're going to be part of it in a very important way." Andorin watched Raych narrowly.

Raych said, "How important? Aren't I gonna be just—a gardener?" His voice sounded hollow, and he found himself unable to put a spark in it.

"You'll be more than that, Planchet. You'll be going in with a blaster."

"With a what?"

"A blaster."

"I never held a blaster. Not in my whole life."

"There's nothing to it. You lift it. You point it. You close the contact, and someone dies."

"I can't kill anyone."

"I thought you were one of us; that you would do anything for the cause."

"I didn't mean—kill." Raych couldn't seem to collect his thoughts. Why must he kill? What did they really have in mind for him? And how would he be able to alert the Palace guards before the killing would be carried out?

Andorin's face hardened suddenly; an instant conversion from friendly interest to stern decision. He said, "You must kill."

Raych gathered all his strength. "No. I ain't gonna kill nobody. That's final."

Andorin said, "Planchet, you will do as you are told."

"Not murder."

"Even murder."

"How you gonna make me?"

"I shall simply tell you to."

Raych felt dizzy. What made Andorin so confident?

He shook his head. "No."

Andorin said, "We've been feeding you, Planchet, ever since you left Wye. I made sure you ate with me. I supervised your diet. Especially the meal you've just eaten."

Raych felt the horror rise within him. He suddenly understood. "Desperance!"

"Exactly," said Andorin. "You're a sharp devil, Planchet."

"It's illegal."

"Yes, of course. So's murder."

Raych knew about desperance. It was a chemical modification of a perfectly harmless tranquilizer. The modified form, however, did not produce tranquillity, but despair. It had been outlawed because of its use in mind control, though there were persistent rumors that the Imperial Guard used it.

Andorin said, as though it were not hard to read Raych's mind, "It's called desperance because that's an old word meaning 'hopelessness.' I think you're feeling hopeless."

"Never," whispered Raych.

"Very resolute of you, but you can't fight the chemical. And the more hopeless you feel, the more effective the drug."

"No chance."

"Think about it, Planchet. Namarti recognized you at once, even without your mustache. He knows you are Raych Seldon, and, at my direction, you are going to kill your father."

Raych muttered, "Not before I kill you."

He rose from his chair. There should be no problem at all in this. Andorin might be taller, but he was slender and, clearly, no athlete. Raych would break him in two with one arm—but he swayed as he rose. He shook his head, but it wouldn't clear.

Andorin rose, too, and backed away. He drew his right hand from where it had been resting within his left sleeve. He was holding a weapon.

He said pleasantly, "I came prepared. I have been informed of your prowess as a Heliconian Twister and there will be no hand-to-hand combat."

He looked down at his weapon. "This is not a blaster," he said. "I can't afford to have you killed before you accomplish your task. It's a neuronic whip. Much worse in a way. I will aim at your left shoulder and, believe me, the pain will be so excruciating that the world's greatest stoic would not be able to endure it."

Raych, who had been advancing slowly and grimly, stopped abruptly. He had been twelve years old when he had had a taste—a small one—of a neuronic whip. Once struck, no one ever forgot the pain, however long he lived, however full of incidents his life.

Andorin said, "Moreover, I will use full strength so that the nerves in your upper arms will be stimulated first into unbearable pain and then damaged into uselessness. You will never use your left arm again. I will spare the right so you can handle the blaster. —Now if you sit down and accept matters, as you must, you may keep both arms. Of course, you must eat again so your desperance level increases. Your situation will only worsen."

Raych felt the drug-induced despair settle over him, and the despair served, in itself, to deepen the effect. His vision was turning double, and he could think of nothing to say.

He knew only that he would have to do what Andorin would tell him to do. He had played the game, and he had lost.

23.

"No!" Hari Seldon was almost violent. "I don't want you out there, Dors."

Venabili stared back at him, with an expression as firm as his own. "Then I won't let you go either, Hari."

"I must be there."

"It is not your place. It is the First Gardener who must greet these new people."

"So it is. But Gruber can't do it. He's a broken man."

"He must have a deputy of some sort, an assistant. Let the old Chief Gardener do it. He holds the office till the end of the year."

"The old Chief Gardener is too ill. Besides," Seldon hesitated, "there are ringers among the gardeners. Trantorians. They're here for some reason. I have the names of every one of them."

"Have them taken into custody, then. Every last one of them. It's simple. Why are you making it so complex?"

"Because we don't know why they're here. Something's up. I don't see what twelve gardeners can do, but— No, let me rephrase that. I can see a dozen things they can do, but I don't know which one of those things they plan. We will indeed take them into custody, but I must know more about everything before it's done.

"We have to know enough to winkle out everyone in the conspiracy from top to bottom, and we must know enough of what they're doing to be able to make the proper punishment stick. I don't want to get twelve men and women on what is essentially a misdemeanor charge. They'll plead desperation; the need for a job. They'll complain it isn't fair for Trantorians to be excluded. They'll get plenty of sympathy and we'll be left looking like fools. We must give them a chance to convict themselves of more than that. Besides—"

There was a long pause and Venabili said wrathfully, "Well, what's the new 'besides'?"

Seldon's voice lowered. "One of the twelve is Raych, using the alias Planchet."

"What?"

"Why are you surprised? I sent him to Wye to infiltrate the Joranumite movement and he's succeeded in infiltrating something. I have every faith in him. If he's there, he knows why he's there, and he must have some sort of plan to put a spoke in the wheel. But I want to be there, too. I want to see him. I want to be in a position to help if I can."

"If you want to help him, have fifty Guards of the Palace standing shoulder to shoulder on either side of your gardeners."

"No. Again, we'll end up with nothing. Security will be in place, but not in evidence. The gardeners in question must think they have a clear hand to do whatever it is they plan to do. Before they can do so, but after they have made it quite plain what they intend—we'll have them."

"That's risky. It's risky for Raych."

"Risks are something we have to take. There's more riding on this than individual lives."

"That is a heartless thing to say."

"You think I have no heart? Even if it broke, my concern would have to be with Psycho—"

"Don't say it." She turned away as if in pain.

"I understand," said Seldon, "but you mustn't be there. Your presence would be so inappropriate that the conspirators will suspect we know too much and will abort their plan. I don't want their plan aborted."

He paused, then said softly, "Dors, you say your job is to protect *me*. That comes before protecting Raych and you know that. I wouldn't insist on it, but to protect me is to protect Psychohistory and the entire human species. That must come first. What I have of Psychohistory tells me that I, in turn, must protect the center at all costs, and that is what I am trying to do. —Do you understand?"

Venabili said, "I understand," and turned away from him.

Seldon thought: And I hope I'm right.

If he weren't, she would never forgive him. Far worse, he would never forgive himself, Psychohistory or not.

24.

They were lined up beautifully, feet spread apart, hands behind their backs, every one in a natty green uniform, loosely-fitted and with wide pockets. There was very little gender differential and one could only guess that some of the shorter ones were women. The hoods covered whatever hair they had, but then, gardeners were supposed to clip their hair quite short, either sex, and there could be no facial hair.

Why that should be, one couldn't say. The word "tradition" covered it all, as it covered so many things, some useful, some foolish.

Facing them was Mandell Gruber, flanked on either side by a deputy. Gruber was trembling, his wide-open eyes glazed.

Hari Seldon's lips tightened. If Gruber could but manage to say, "The Emperor's Gardeners greet you all," that would be enough. Seldon himself would then take over.

His eyes swept over the new contingent and he located Raych.

His heart jumped a bit. It was the mustacheless Raych in the front row, standing more rigid than the rest, staring straight ahead. His eyes did not move to meet Seldon's; he showed no sign of recognition, however subtle.

Good, thought Seldon. He's not supposed to. He's giving nothing away.

Gruber muttered a weak welcome and Seldon jumped in.

He advanced with an easy stride, putting himself immediately before Gruber and said, "Thank you, Acting First Gardener. Men and women, Gardeners of the Emperor, you are to undertake an important task. You will be responsible for the beauty and health of the only open land on our great world of Trantor, capital of the Galactic Empire. You will see to it that if we don't have the endless vistas of open, undomed worlds, we will have a small jewel here that will outshine anything else in the Empire.

"You will all be under Mandell Gruber, who will shortly become First Gardener. He will report to me, when necessary, and I will report to the

Emperor. This means, as you can all see, that you will be only three levels removed from the Imperial presence, and you will always be under his benign watch. I am certain that even now he is surveying us from the Small Palace, his personal home, which is the building you see to the right—the one with the opal-layered dome—and that he is pleased with what he sees.

"Before you start work, of course, you will all undertake a course of training that will make you entirely familiar with the grounds and their needs. You will—"

He had by this time, moved, almost stealthily, to a point directly in front of Raych, who still remained motionless, unblinking.

Seldon tried not to look unnaturally benign and then a slight frown crossed his face. The person directly behind Raych looked familiar. He might have gone unrecognized if Seldon had not studied his hologram. Wasn't that Gleb Andorin of Wye? Raych's patron in Wye, in fact? What was he doing here?

Andorin must have noticed Seldon's sudden regard, for he muttered something between scarcely opened lips and Raych's right arm, moving forward from behind his back, plucked a blaster out of the wide pocket of his green doublet. So did Andorin.

Seldon felt himself going into near-shock. How could blasters have been allowed onto the grounds? Confused, he barely heard the cries of "Treason" and the sudden noise of running and shouting.

All that really occupied Seldon's mind was Raych's blaster pointing directly at him, and Raych looking at him without any sign of recognition. Seldon's mind filled with horror as he realized that his son was going to shoot, and that he himself was only seconds from death.

25.

A blaster, despite its name, does not "blast" in the proper sense of the term. It vaporizes and blows out an interior and, if anything, causes an implosion. There is a soft, sighing sound, leaving what appears to be a "blasted" object.

Hari Seldon did not expect to hear that sound. He expected only death. It was, therefore, with surprise that he heard the distinctive soft, sighing sound, and he blinked rapidly as he looked down at himself, slack-jawed.

He was alive? (He thought it as a question, not a statement.)

Raych was still standing there, his blaster pointing forward, his eyes glazed. He was absolutely motionless as though some motive power had ceased.

Behind him was the crumpled body of Andorin, fallen in a pool of blood, and standing next to him, blaster in hand, was a gardener. The hood had slipped away; the gardener was clearly a woman with freshly clipped hair.

She allowed herself a glance at Seldon and said, "Your son knows me as Manella Dubanqua. I'm Imperial Guard. Do you want my identification, First Minister?"

"No," said Seldon faintly. Security personnel had converged on the scene. "My son! What's wrong with my son?"

"Desperance, I think," said Manella. "That can be washed out eventually." She reached forward to take the blaster out of Raych's hand. "I'm sorry I didn't act sooner. I had to wait for an overt move and, when it came, it almost caught me napping."

"I had the same trouble. We must take Raych to the Palace hospital."

A confused noise suddenly emanated from the Small Palace. It occurred to Seldon that the Emperor was indeed watching the proceedings and, if so, he must be grandly furious indeed.

"Take care of my son, Ms. Dubanqua," said Seldon. "I must see the Emperor."

He set off at an undignified run through the chaos on the Great Lawns, and dashed into the Small Palace without ceremony. Cleon could scarcely grow any angrier over that.

And there, with an appalled group watching in stupor—there, on the semi-circular stairway, was the body of His Imperial Majesty, Cleon I, smashed all but beyond recognition. His rich Imperial robes now served as a shroud. Cowering against the wall, staring stupidly at the horrified faces surrounding him, was Mandell Gruber.

Seldon felt he could take no more. He took in the blaster lying at Gruber's feet. It had been Andorin's, he was sure. He asked softly, "Gruber, what have you done?"

Gruber, staring at him, babbled, "Everyone screaming and yelling. I thought, who would know? They would think someone else had killed the Emperor. But then I couldn't run."

"But Gruber. Why?"

"So I wouldn't have to be First Gardener." And he collapsed.

Seldon stared in shock at the unconscious Gruber.

Everything had worked out by the narrowest of margins. He himself was alive. Raych was alive. Andorin was dead and the Joranumite conspiracy would now be hunted down to the last person.

The center would have held, just as Psychohistory had dictated.

And then one man, for a reason so trivial as to defy analysis, had killed the Emperor.

And now, thought Seldon in despair, what do we do? What happens?●

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IN PRAISE OF TIMELESSNESS

Hours and minutes have fled.
Seconds are as elusive as ever.
There are no right years anymore.
No true decades or centuries.

As the climes of humankind
resonate through the universe
the rules of relative space
take on absolute significance

and each meandering soul must
cast its own clock and calendar.
Like the dust from entropic stars
generations drift and coalesce,

epochs intertwine, styles abound
until all times are in fashion,
abetted by the lightning miles,
redshifted in constant revision.

Even those sacred nigh-immortals
who now travel openly among us
(envied by some, pitied by others),
their scattered faces baldly aglow

with the luminous high senility
of their wasted age and wisdom,
brain frayed and bare sensual
as only the brain frayed can be,

must tread each ripening instant
as if it could be the first and last.
As we all are compelled to begin
again in this age of strayed color

and chronological calculation.
Shedding our outdated histories
like the husks of dry chrysali,
watching the past obliterate,

we are birthed to transience.
We learn to inhabit and embrace
the staggered synchronicity
of algorithmic space.

—Bruce Boston

ON BOOKS

by
Norman Spinrad

MID-LIST HEROES

Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede
Bradley Denton
Morrow, $20.00
Mojo and the Pickle Jar
Douglas Bell
Tor, $3.95
A Woman of the Iron People
Eleanor Arnason
Morrow, $22.95
Madlands
K.W. Jeter
St. Martin's, $18.95
Down the Bright Way
Robert Reed
Bantam Spectra, $4.50
The Next Wave #2: Alien Tongue
Stephen Leigh
Bantam Spectra, $4.99
The Next Wave #1: Red Genesis
S.C. Sykes
Bantam Spectra, $4.99

The SF publishing industry continues to churn out new titles at a rate of over five hundred a year. No more than fifty of them, and not necessarily Sturgeon's famous quality 10 percent, are given significant promotional push. The rest of them, and by no means entirely Sturgeon's infamous 90 percent crud, get dumped out there on the racks on a wing and a prayer, and come pouring in through the hapless reviewer's mailbox to clutter up the office and living room in great untidy stacks.

Pity the poor reviewer. By festooning them with hyperbolic Big Name blurbs, embossing, and foil, by featuring them as leads in their monthly sell-sheets, the publishers proclaim the primacy of no more than 20 percent of their annual product, and, of course, we all have our favorite writers whose work we eagerly place at the top of the pile.

But what of the rest? At least four hundred books a year, the overwhelming majority of them schlockily packaged paperbacks. Somewhere in this vast haystack of crud are buried maybe a couple of dozen golden needles—promising first novels by writers no one has yet heard of or by writers who have published a few stories, second and third novels by writers to watch who have not yet managed to attain general visibility, even works by writers of proven merit who have long labored in unjust obscurity.

How is the critic to find them?

Pity the poor bookstore buyer, or even, god help us, the buyers for the major chains. Beyond the books being given major advertising and promotional push by the publishers and/or those attached to recognizable brand names, how are they to choose which books to fill out the rest of their limited rackspace with?

Pity the poor readers. How are they to choose what to buy, when most of the SF books that confront them as they peruse the SF racks are packaged more or less the same, and all of them come decorated with copy that proclaim them to be the greatest thing since chopped liver?

Pity the poor "mid-list" writers, which is to say the authors of at least 80 percent of the SF titles offered for sale, whose works hit the racks as part of a vast wad of indistinguishable product, the individual virtues thereof buried in the haystack of mediocrity and worse.

Admittedly, in the best of all possible worlds, it is indeed primarily the critic's responsibility to bring worthy works to the attention of the bookstore buyers and the readers.

But in the real world, with the exception of *Publishers Weekly*, *Locus,* and a few specialized newsletters, bookstore buyers will have had to have made their decisions before any review can possibly appear, and in the case of paperback originals, most titles will have disappeared from the racks before readers can possibly have the benefit of reviews in magazines such as this one.

An easy cop-out for a reviewer in my position, I suppose. But SF reviewers, no less than SF writers, must proceed on the basis of "as if," which is to say, we must proceed as if what we choose to review and what we say about it will be able to provide guidance for *someone.*

And indeed, perhaps, by elucidating my own selective process, I may at the least be able to offer some tips for bookstore buyers selecting for their racks and their clients looking for a good read for their money.

First of all, one can pretty much discount publishers' copy, all of which is designed to sell you each and every book. The single exception I can think of to this rule is a blurb by Robert Sheckley which actually appeared on the jacket of something forgettable: "If you only buy one book a year, don't buy this one either."

Of course there *is* personal taste. As readers, we all have our generic detestations, and fortunately for me, two of mine are franchise novels written by wage slaves in someone else's copyright universe, and middle books in novel series, which, alas, these days cuts the stack at least in half.

Finally, as a writer, I have an admitted prejudice against produced novels, where a publisher contracts with an outside packager for a line of books for which it essentially acts as the printer and distributor. First, because I see no reason why a third party should be allowed to dip his beak in the advance and royalties of the creative artist, and second because it seems to me to be an abdication of editorial responsibility on the part of publishers not to be encouraged.

This, however, *is* a prejudice,

and not an absolute rule, for I admit to having found good stuff in the Ben Bova Discovery Series, and Byron Preiss's Last Wave, about which later, and it would be adding insult to assumed injury to ignore books just because I have a suspicion the writers thereof may have been ripped off by industry practice.

So, okay, I've selected the books by writers whose previous work I've admired out of the slushpile, and eliminated half of the rest by a negative process. Now what?

Well, while it is true that you can't tell a book by its cover, and never more so than in the SF genre, sometimes a title just jumps up at you in a manner that can't be ignored.

For instance *Buddy Holly Is Alive and Well on Ganymede* by Bradley Denton, or *Mojo and the Pickle Jar* by Douglas Bell.

Say what?

I had never heard of Bell, and Denton was just a name attached to the well-known titles of a couple of stories I hadn't read, but how could I resist giving these items at least a little sniff?

This usually means reading the first page and maybe a random page from the middle to see if the unknown writer's voice speaks to me, to give him a chance to set a hook.

From *Buddy Holly*, the Prologue:

"In life, their names were linked for only a few cold, miserable weeks.

In death, their names became a Trinity, as if carved into the same tablet of sacred stone.

Ritchie Valens. The Big Bopper. Buddy Holly.

Years later, we would look back with longing and say that the music had died.

We should have known better."

This was enough to tell me that the novel was not going to be your sci-fi standard, that it probably had a connection to the surreal pop cult roots of American culture that most SF lacks, and that Bradley Denton might have that elusive something called *style*, which was quite enough to get me to turn the page and see what *Buddy Holly* might be about.

And indeed, as the title promises, Buddy Holly speedily enough appears on the TV screen of the protagonist and narrator, Oliver Vale, apparently alive, more or less well, if rather bemused, and broadcasting somehow from the surface of Ganymede.

Oliver, conceived in the back seat of a 1955 Chevy by an unknown father and a proto hippie-dip rock and roll obsessed teenaged mother at the moment of Buddy Holly's death by plane crash on February 3, 1959 and with Holly's "Heartbeat" playing on the radio, bears a curious physical resemblance to Holly, and is sort of considered his spiritual reincarnation by Mom, who even takes to calling him Buddy.

Oliver's mystical Mom was sold her satellite dish by these weird shape-changing aliens, or whatever they are, and, as it turns out, the Holly-Ganymede broadcast is blanketing world-wide TV transmission. So when Holly sends a personal message to Oliver thereon, Oliver gets blamed for what is going on, and finds himself on the run for the rest of the novel, pursued by an aging government hit-man, the minions of a TV evangelist, his shrink and her lawyer boyfriend, a second set of weird aliens masquerading as his next door neighbors, and their robot dog Ringo. Fleeing for mystical reasons on his trusty motorcycle Peggy Sue toward the scene of Holly's death, Oliver is aided by the maniacal right-wing feminist Gretchen, assorted bikers, and . . .

Enough. The plot, several key portions of which are not resolved anyway, is not only impossible to summarize, but is not what *Buddy Holly* is really about.

What *Buddy Holly* is really about is the spiritual odyssey of the middle-brow, middle class, middle American consciousness from the 1950s (two of the aliens are called "Eisenhower" and "Khrushchev" and are the spitting images of same) through the psychedelic sixties and the New Age seventies and eighties via the diaries of Oliver's Mom, and on into the immediate future of the long present-tense chase, the whole strung along the vector of rock and roll, pop cult trivia, TV, and the sort of stuff infesting the back pages of the *National Enquirer* and B-movie reality.

Action-packed and funny it all is, schtick piled upon schtick, but emotionally realistic too, for Denton imbues his cartoon characters with inner lives (even the aliens, even the robot dog), that makes the reader care for them as they stagger and pratfall through this surreal mediascape toward a kind of genuine mystic apotheosis. The ending is quite touching, tender even, leaving one with the feeling that, on some elusive deep level, this long strange trip, surreal though it be, is indeed the inner story of the voyage of middle American consciousness through the zeitgeist of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Bradley Denton has written an admirable first novel reminiscent of Pynchon and Sheckley, successfully cakewalking a fine balance between surrealism and emotional verisimilitude, outer silliness and inner truth.

One thing, though: I have no more use for the breed than anyone else, and probably less than most, but I *am* getting rather weary of evil mountebank TV preachers, who seem to be popping up as main villains in just about every SF novel dealing with contemporary American culture these days. I'm beginning to long perversely for a novel in which one of these bozos turns out to be the hero, or at least something unexpected.

The Virgin Mary (or anyway a bizarre avatar thereof) turns out to be the savior (sort of) of the multiverse in *Mojo and the Pickle Jar,* the Minions of Hell are the heavies, and the moral universe of the novel is pretty much that of a kind of Tex-Mex Roman Catholicism. Not my planet, Monkey Boy, so I probably would have given it a pass if the title hadn't persuaded me to read the opening, which goes:

"Mojo had a talent for spoons. . . . Even as a child, Mojo had been able to bend spoons and open locks and rearrange the positions of cards in a deck without even touching it. . . . It was spoons that allowed Mojo to grow up straight and tall and proud instead of bowed and bent and weasel-eyed like the other children whose mothers had 'Make Love, Not War' tattooed on their thighs."

Okay, so this is a kind of Catholic fantasy novel, the central wampeter of which is a saint's heart (what the thing in the pickle jar turns out to be) which must be returned to its rightful place in order to save the universe from the Satanic Forces; certainly not my usual stick of tea, it's not exactly serious stuff, nor is it quite screamingly hilarious, but I read it anyway, and was quite happy that I did.

Why?

Well, the title got me to open it, and the opening got me to read the first chapter, in which this smart-ass East Texan Anglo punk Mojo gets involved in a busted coke deal with the courier Juanita and her mystical pickle jar, boosts his uncle's Cadillac, and flees across the soon-to-become-mystic Texan landscape, pursued by (satanic) coke gangsters, the Hounds of Hell, and a Texas Ranger named Narn, all related in a good-humored, laconic, aside-spiced kind of Texas-hip style by Douglas Bell.

What's so, well, *neat,* about this novel is that Bell takes a species of well-worn fantasy plot-line—innocent naïfs in possession of the holy object pursued by satanic powers across a familiar landscape larded with unpredictable metamorphoses and through the nethermost pits of hell to a triumphant world-saving apotheosis, aided by sundry mystic avatars—but by cranking it through an unfamiliar milieu, quite non-standard characters, and a literary style not usual to this sort of stuff, turns it into quite something else.

An Anglo punk, a chicana street-urchin, an East Texan bruja, a Texas Ranger taking on demons with a 12-gauge, assorted low-riders, coke dealers, tough old grannies, a descent through a highly non-standard bureaucratic sort of hell, a wonderful tour-de-force trip sequence through the macrocosm, the microcosm, and back again with a cosmological rigor that seems to come from quite a different sort of book, a bit of Texan colonial history, lots of car chases, plot twists, character turn-arounds. . . .

A literary masterpiece *Mojo and the Pickle Jar* isn't, but it is something that, alas, seems almost rarer these days—an entertaining, good-spirited, amusingly written, non-standard mid-list paperback original SF novel by a new writer that is not a franchise in someone else's universe or part of some dim series, but a well-realized stand-alone work that is fun to read, was probably fun to write, and gives you fair value and then some for your $3.95.

By itself, *Mojo and the Pickle Jar* might not set the world on fire, but if the vast ream of commercial crud infesting the mid-list were replaced by more books like it, the cumulative effect certainly would.

And if Bell hadn't slapped that intriguing title on it, I probably wouldn't have read it. Think about it. How many mid-list novels of similar quality spend their thirty days on the racks and then disappear beneath our notice because they happen to lack such a quick hook? Who knows? Who knows *how* to know?

Well, as a critic, occasionally I *will* pay attention to an accompanying letter from an editor more or less pleading with me to pay attention to a book I would otherwise probably not place close to the top of the pile, if the editor in question is someone in whose literary track record I have some confidence, if the editor knows *me* well enough to know what sort of objective information about a book, rather than hypeful praise, is likely to arouse my interest, if the letter can appeal to some elusive sense of critical duty.

For instance, *A Woman of the Iron People,* by Eleanor Arnason. Not exactly a boffo hook of a title. A writer who I had never heard of, but whom the galley jacket copy described as a successful fantasy novelist attempting her first science fiction novel. Not the sort of thing I generally expect to turn me on.

But the galleys came with a personal non-computer-generated note from the editor, David Hartwell, whose literary judgment I have had reason to credit, saying, in essence, that this was an interesting and rare piece of feminist anthropological science fiction that he was publishing despite its perhaps questionable commercial viability, and that deserved more attention than it was likely to get.

Oblique, perhaps, but uncommonly honest, a kind of well-written blurb designed for an audience of one, the long and short of it being that I took David's word for it, opened the book, began reading, and persevered through a rather slow fifty or sixty pages bereft of any real immediate powerful interest, until, at some place I can't quite point to, I found myself quite absorbed by Arnason's steady, careful craft, by the slow build-up of what seemed like a fairly simple story, by the stepwise build-up of telling detail, by the levels of subtlety and complexity that take their time to emerge.

One could argue endlessly whether or not *A Woman of the Iron People* is a feminist novel; if David Hartwell hadn't called it that, I don't think I would have ever thought of it as such just because the two main viewpoint characters, Lixia the anthropologist, and Anasu, the alien she contacts to study, are both strong females, and the biology of the native sapients of Sigma Draconis II has led to a culture in which females are socially dominant. I mean, if you substituted male for female in this equation, would you really get a "masculinist" or "phallocratic" novel? Ironically enough, only an extreme feminist would so contend.

A Woman of the Iron People is, however, indeed most definitely anthropological science fiction. A slower-than-light starship arrives at Sigma Draconis II and sends down lone anthropologists to study the various "primitive" native cultures, for the sake of pure science, but also to determine whether or not human settlements can blend more or less harmoniously with the native cultures, for this future enlightened Earth society follows something like *Star Trek's* Prime Directive in such matters, chastened by Earth's long unpleasant history of colonialism and unintended cultural genocide.

Lixia is dropped on the planet, makes contact and gets accepted by Anasu, the "Woman of the Iron People" of the title, herself something of an outcast among her own people for complex cultural reasons. Lixia travels about with her, studying her ways and the various native cultures they encounter, while Anasu tries to figure *her* out.

This is sort of a basic anthropological SF set-up, and it's rather slow-moving at first, two aliens learning of each other's bizarre ways via an accumulation of details in a trip across a not immensely interesting landscape. On the other hand, it *does* have the ring of real anthropological fieldwork to it, since, contrary to the usual SF cliché, one would indeed wish to deal slowly and carefully with a few native informants in relative isolation before landing one's flying saucer on the local equivalent of the White House lawn.

So the novel doesn't start off with a bang, and it takes a while to get really interesting. One is so focused on Lixia's exploration of Anasu's culture and Anasu's perceptions of the bizarre human, that it takes a while to realize that the human culture from which Lixia comes is more outré and perhaps more interesting to the present day reader than that of this alien planet.

For one thing, it's Marxist, and for another thing, it seems to be dominantly Asian. It may not quite be a Marxist utopia, but it's no dystopia either—a kind of communally spirited, libertarian, non-repressive, non-sexist, rather democratic,. and all-in-all rather attractive Marxist society, a successful extrapolation of what Alexander Dubček called "Socialism with a human face," given a decidedly Confucian and Taoist twist.

As the novel progresses and the human teams begin to hook up, the novel slowly begins to shift focus, to become at least as much a social anthropological examination of the human interaction level of this extrapolated human society, with virtues to be sure, but warts and all, a most subtle and fascinating counterpoint to the stepwise unveilings of the intricacies of the alien culture.

By the time communications from Earth intrude to establish the fact that, thanks to the time-dilation effect and the wheels of history, centuries have passed there since the expedition was dispatched and this culture has quite passed away on the planet of its birth in favor of what seems from this remove like a rather nasty and superstitious degeneration, leaving this isolated remnant orbiting Sigma Draconis II, the reader has been artfully set up to mourn its loss.

A Woman of the Iron People is a rather deliberately paced novel that gathers steam slowly, that does not really run along an action-packed plotline, that requires a certain amount of patience, intellectual investment, and faith on the part of the reader, that will probably be given up on by those unwilling to grant same to a book not crafted to immediately suck them in, and for that reason probably will, given the present state of the genre, get less attention than it deserves.

But those readers who persist will be amply rewarded, not by an instant candidate for the Hugo and the Nebula, but by a well-crafted deliberate work of genuine intellectual merit. This *should be* one of the main things that the mid-list is all about: a place where good novels without a massive commercial appeal can meet their smaller natural audience.

Similarly, but for rather different reasons, K.W. Jeter's *Madlands* is not likely to be a big box office success with the SF mass audience, the sort of readers who enjoy, say, the fantasy of Terry Brooks or J.R.R. Tolkien, the science fiction of Niven, Brin, or even Asimov and Clarke. K.W. Jeter is no new writer. He's been around quite a while, published many books, and always marched to his own different drummer, a kind of heavy metal cutting edge surrealism, a unique blend of Dick, Shirley, Steve Erickson, William Burroughs, and a bit of Pynchon, not likely to ever hit the Top 40, nor calculated to do so.

Rough, tough, savage, nasty, street-smart, packed with brutal action, ghoulishly sophisticated, hard-edged and all-too-psychologically realistic from a certain warped perspective, but not at all circumscribed by conventional plot-structure, mimetic realism, or adherence to standard SF tropes, Jeter's work is simply not for the average SF reader and probably never will be.

Madlands is a good example. It takes place in a kind of surreal Los Angeles of the mind that is rather hard to locate in space-time, if it exists in such a matrix at all. After some sort of war, something or other has happened, and now Los Angeles exists (if that is the word), as the "Madlands" of the title, a zone compounded of old media images that seem to actualize themselves more or less randomly, the whole hovered over by the dirigible Hindenburg forever frozen in the moment of fiery explosion chez the famous film-clip.

Somehow strung below it is the Web, a kind of antenna, but also a sort of storage matrix for Madlands denizens existing in a kind of electronic immortality as a element of the consciousness of Identrope, the master thereof, the reality-creating god of the Madlands universe, also yet another evil star TV evangelist, though mercifully hardly of the standard Christian variety.

Something—a virus, a field—produces the n-formation effect, whereby those who remain in the zone too long suffer a kind of runaway-cancer-cum-cellular chaos which causes them to dissolve into a loathesome mess of random body parts and even melanges of different organisms out of many phyla, some of which have never been identified and would disgust you to see.

Trayne, the protagonist, is able to remain in the Madlands without suffering this sickening fate because he exists as a consciousness able to switch bodies before the protoplasm gets too sticky. He works for Identrope as a choreographer, producing the bizarre dance numbers that accompany his top-rated TV act.

For reasons too convoluted to summarize or possibly to understand, Trayne is hired to snuff his employer by a group who have found themselves a sophisticated left-over military broadcast satellite, or so at least they think, which they want to use to muscle their way into the Nielsens, after which things get *really* complicated. . . .

If you find this summary of the set-up hard to follow, well, welcome to the club, but that doesn't necessarily mean you won't enjoy this novel. Jeter eventually gives a certain amount of somewhat half-assed pseudoscientific justification for most of this stuff, but this justification seems like not much more than a bow toward conventional SF reader expectations. What *Madlands* really is is surrealism, or a kind of North American Magic Realism, in which the story logic proceeds along imagistic rather than rational vectors, in which reality mutates freely in order to create desired literary effects, in which the actualization of images from the popular collective unconscious *is* the reality level and its own self-justification.

Say what?

Well, think of it as the literary equivalent of the Madlands itself; in this case, the message becomes the medium.

Certain people are attracted to this zone and tend to remain in it despite the dangers of succumbing to the n-formation effect because they find the subsumation of consensus reality by what Jeter calls "white reality"—a reality that includes all conceivable realities as white light includes all possible colors of the spectrum—attractive, a high, if you will, or even if you won't.

Same effect, basically, for which some people take psychedelic drugs. Same effect, basically, for which some people like to read this kind of novel.

Well, you're either that kind of people, or you're not, no blame either way. It's simply a matter of taste. Time was, such taste approached mass audience demographics, and works catering to it had a shot at a limited kind of bestsellerdom. Now this audience is probably smaller, and the mid-list is where it is most likely to find what it's looking for, if only there were a reliable way to find it.

Robert Reed's *Down the Bright Way*, on the other hand, is the sort of science fiction novel that delivers a cognate of much the same sort of effect *within* the familiar traditional SF parameters, what mainline SF readers have long called the "sense of wonder," the operative difference being that *this* brand of high is obtained not via translation into the surreal literary realm of "white reality" but by persuading readers with more literal-minded tastes to suspend their disbelief in the possibility that higher realities can be continuous with their own.

In this case, the higher reality in question is the "Bright Way" of the title, a kind of space-time metro system apparently constructed by unknown advanced entities called the "Makers," whereby humans from different Earths, past, present, future, and alternate, are able to travel among the same. A kind of transtemporal (if that is the word) society, the Wanderers, has arisen. It is led by Jy, an ancient sage of the first people to discover the Bright Way, and made up of people from many Earths and eras. The Wanderers voyage up and down the Bright Way, inducting Earths into the network, saving some of them from their own folly, eventually forced to combat the UnFound, a warped Earth dedicated to protoplasmic destruction, and all the while hoping to finally meet up with the Makers at the end of the long quest.

As the story opens, the Wanderers have already contacted *our* Earth, and Kyle, a citizen thereof, masquerading as one of the Wanderers for his own purposes, ends up becoming the real thing, as he is sucked into a great and complex conflict raging up and down the Bright Way, along with Billie, an ordinary young woman whom he has bedazzled with his pretense.

All sorts of humans from all sorts of Earths are involved in this multi-sided conflict between the Wanderers led by Jy traveling the Way in one direction, the UnFound, and those Wanderers led in the other direction by the renegade Moliak, who have been warped into something rather different by the evolutionary pressures of combating same.

It's all very complex, grand scale, and mind-bending in a fine old SF tradition. But Reed has brought it all up to date in a certain literary sense by giving his characters a psychological realism and believable sets of morally ambiguous motivations and writing the novel in a level of prose, which, while hardly outré or experimental, stands a cut above most SF in this mode. *Down the Bright Way* is basically the good old stuff written for sophisticated adults. It's much better than a good deal of current fiction in this vein that has received more push and attention.

So why was it published as a mid-list paperback original? It's not Robert Reed's first novel, but he hasn't made a reputation yet either, so, in the world of commercial publishing realities, what else was there to do with it?

In a properly functioning publishing atmosphere, such an "under-published" mid-list novel would be a necessary step in such a writer's career evolution, garnering sufficient critical praise and readership following so that Reed's next one would be viable as a hardcover or at least as a prominent monthly paperback lead.

Whether this will happen in the current atmosphere remains to be seen. If you asked me why I chose to read this novel, I couldn't give you a coherent answer. I wasn't familiar with the writer, the package was nothing in particular, no editor pointed me insistently toward it. In this case, I was no different from a reader pulling a book at random out of the racks and lucking into something out of the ordinary.

Unsettling for me as a critic? For sure!

Daunting for the reader confronting a rackful of undifferentiated product? Maybe, but promising too, to stick in your thumb, and pull out a plum.

Scary for writers?

Better believe it!

Scary for writers too, from a somewhat different perspective, is the current trend toward packaged novel series. Things like the Ben Bova Discovery series one can understand, and even admire, as a more or less legitimate way of making first novels more commercially viable by getting a recognizable name on the cover. But what is one to make of something like the "Next Wave" series packaged by Byron Preiss for Bantam Spectra?

Each of these novels (or at least the first two) comes with an introduction by Isaac Asimov that seems to be a reprint of some science column and a scientific afterword by someone else of lesser star magnitude. Preiss himself may be SF's most famous packager, but he's not a writer, Big Name or otherwise.

So why has Bantam gone this route? It's hard to see any other reason save that Preiss must be offering them an economically attractive deal, either securing the material for them at bargain prices, or fronting some of the capital, or both. Preiss has to be getting his cut from *somewhere,* and it's hard to see where that could be except out of the advances and royalties paid to the writers of the novels.

As a writer, it's hard for me to like the aroma of this sort of thing, which is to say, I'm admittedly prejudiced against it. Nevertheless. . . .

Rudy Rucker's demented rappings are something I always find amusing, so I couldn't keep from reading his afterword to *Alien Tongue* by Stephen Leigh, wherein I learned that this novel was concerned with alien linguistics, a subject that I personally find fascinating, so I swallowed my prejudice and read it.

And liked it very much indeed.

Alien Tongue is a first contact novel. A wormhole tunnel has been discovered in the outskirts of our solar system. Patrick and Kaitlin are astronauts competing for the first mission through who become lovers during the process. Kaitlin wins, gets the mission, goes through, sends back a distress signal, and then contact is lost. Patrick goes along on the second mission, the ship is disabled, and the crew is rescued and/or captured by a spaceship of the Avian civilization at the other end of the wormhole, who are *not* the builders of the thing. The crew is dispersed, and the bulk of the novel, told from both human and Avian viewpoints, concerns itself with Patrick's search for Kaitlin, and how these mutually alien civilizations interact, via escapes, captures, and involvements of the humans with various internal Avian factions.

Like *A Woman of the Iron People,* this is anthropological science fiction, but these aliens, aside from being much more advanced, are, well, a lot more alien. Leigh does a thoroughly first rate job of portraying an avian civilization, the biology of these flying sapients determining their architecture, of course, but also their quite different cultural patterns and individual psychologies.

And their language. Not only is the grammar alien, the Avians are male, female, and neuter sequentially, with different personalities in each of these states, giving three, not two, genders of personal pronouns. And name forms change constantly with both altered social status and tribal affiliation in this laterally complex and highly stratified society. Further, Leigh uses *'s to transcribe a kind of whistling avian phoneme, leading to a novel full of passages like:

"Though Sr*Ren*Bei**ai could tell that *ee ached to ask the questions of Sr*Ren*Bei**ai that he could not ask Hr*Tyi*Bei*k*ai, *ee did not. After all, a **k*ai did not question an **ai about another **k*ai's affairs."

If you think this makes for less than facile reading, you are right, and pity the poor typesetter and proofreader, but the genius of it is that by the time you are deep into this sort of stuff, it's not only making sense, but making points about Avian society and character in its own language. The two quoted sentences, for example, in the process of saying that one Avian wanted to question a second about matters he could not bring up to a third but couldn't because it just wasn't done, also denote both the hierarchical statuses and lateral tribal affiliations of the sapients in question, explaining why in the process.

Nor does Leigh scant his human characters. Far from being stick-figure foils for the main business, they are all well-individuated, rendered with psychological verisimilitude, and the relationships among them are satisfyingly subtle and complex.

All in all, *Alien Tongue* is a solid, satisfying, intellectually interesting, well-crafted science fiction novel, certainly capable of standing on its own two feet, which led me to ask Betsy Mitchell, the Bantam editor of same (whatever *that* means in this context) why it was being published within this labyrinthine packaging apparatus.

I got no explanation I found coherent, but she did take the opportunity to insist that the other "Last Wave" novel Bantam was presently publishing, *Red Genesis* by S.C. Sykes, was at least as good.

Well, having had my prejudice confounded the first time, I looked into that one too, albeit not without a certain lingering skepticism.

If anything, I was even more pleasantly surprised.

Red Genesis is about the colonization of Mars sometime in the next century and is just about the best and most believable treatment of the subject I have ever read.

The novel begins on Earth and takes its own sweet time getting to Mars, as does the protagonist, Graham Kuan Sinclair. This is not your standard twenty-first century Earth, but it has the ring of extrapolated truth. China and the East Asian "Tiger" countries have become economically and culturally co-equal with the West, if not dominant. Ecological policies have become dominant too. The laws are stringent, and the planet is pretty much being cleaned up. On the other hand, AIDS and various other plagues have made a big deal out of personal contact; people don't even touch each other without considerable thought. World society has become highly stratified, economically and socially, and it's a multinational corporate jungle out there in which even snuff jobs are all part of just doing business.

The Sino-American Sinclair, heir to a vast fortune, has been raised as a top predator in the corporate food chain virtually from birth; he's very good at it, but also an aristocratic snob and a rather constipated personality, who has never really formed intimate relationships.

For reasons of corporate hugger-mugger, Sinclair takes a corporate fall for a major eco-crime, and is exiled to Mars for the rest of his life, forbidden any further contact with Earth. He's not even allowed a watch because all of them are manufactured on Earth and would inform him of the time on the home planet.

Thus, the careful and detailed portrayal of the terrestrial society that neither Sinclair nor the reader will see again pays off in a keen appreciation of what he has lost, and of what kind of society is behind the Mars colonization program.

Sinclair is taken to Mars by Baker, his "Transition Escort," and it takes something like ten different space vehicles, several months, and a good many pages to get there. Sykes has really done some homework, and one is utterly convinced that this is how it would have to be in this time-frame.

So too Sykes's Mars. No canals, no alien lifeforms, no outré artifacts, just the real thing, described with great scientific and literary verisimilitude—a hostile surface where one must travel in a rover and wear a heavy spacesuit, five small colonies dug in and clustered close together, the whole serviced by an orbiting space station and facilities on the Martian moons, and administered by a commission which regards the "Martians" as cages full of guinea pigs. Mankind's first precarious toehold on another planet is a marginal operation in every way.

Into this set-up is dropped Sinclair, a corporate shark out of water in a certain sense, a Heinleinian "Competent Man," albeit, with his half-Chinese cultural background, his Taoist philosophy, his pining for lost Earth, his emotional and apparently sexual reticence, a character far more complex and ambiguous than anything in Heinlein.

Sykes's strategy is to inject this catalytic character into nascent Martian society and let the reader watch him work while this frontier works on him, and it would perhaps not be giving away too much to say that this, in a way, is the strategy of the Mars Commission too. Nor is it giving away too much to say that the personal story is that of Sinclair's transformation from an exile longing for lost Earth to a committed Martian, since one knows from the beginning that that's going to happen with a set-up like this.

Red Genesis is hard science fiction at its absolute best. Never has a relatively near-future Earth-Mars transportation system and the reality of Mars and early colonies thereon been worked out and described better than this, and probably never this well either. Seldom has the protagonist of such stuff been a character as interesting and believable as Sinclair; not often do we see such an arrogantly superior yet somehow sympathetic prig mature toward fuller humanity under evolutionary pressure as Sinclair does here.

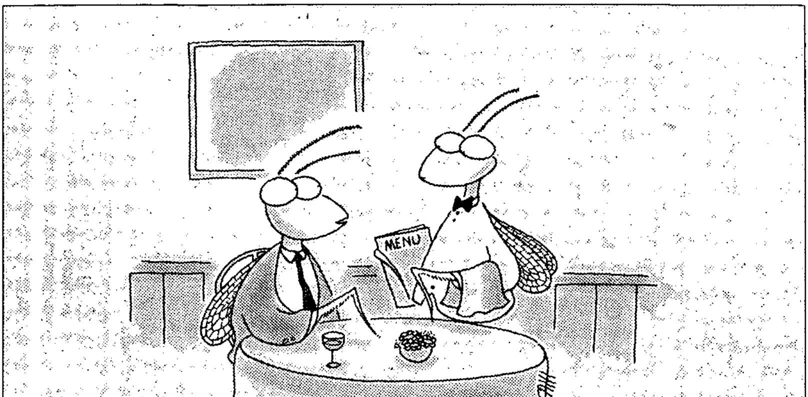
If there is one flaw in *Red Genesis,* it is the love story. Early on in his sojourn on Mars, Sinclair meets up with Paris Tucker, an engaging, well-drawn, humorous, plucky, entirely believable woman, who openly pines for him for the rest of the book. They frequently share the same bed platonically, and the relationship between them is the central one in the book. Yet Sinclair ends up falling in love with an admirable stock figure, and marries her. Only *fifteen years* after her death do Sinclair and Paris finally seem to get it together. An annoyingly silly piece of unbelievable stock business in an otherwise almost perfectly realized novel.

Still, *Red Genesis* certainly is another one of those golden needles hidden in the mid-list haystack—platinum, even. I must admit that Byron Preiss' first two "Last Wave" novels have dispelled my prejudice about what is likely to be found within the covers of this packaged series.

But not my confusion. Why does a major SF publisher feel that two novels as strong as *Alien Tongue* and *Red Genesis* have to be published like this? If novels as good as this by relatively unknown writers really aren't viable as honest unadorned mid-list books, then what the hell is? And given the profusion of schlocko franchise universe novels also appearing in series packages, will such a strategy even succeed in matching up works like these with their natural audience?

Perhaps it is to Bantam's credit that they are at least thrashing around in an attempt to find ways of breaking really worthy mid-list novels out of the bewildering wall of crud that confronts us as critics, bookstore buyers, and readers.

But it certainly is no credit to the current state of SF publishing, packaging, marketing, and retailing that they feel they have to. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The last weekend in March traditionally kicks off the Spring con(vention) season. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. If calling (early evening's good) say why you're calling right off. Look for me at cons with the Filthy Pierre badge.

MARCH 1992

5–8—**ConTact.** For info, write: **1412 Potomac Ave. SE, Washington DC 20003.** Or phone: **(202) 544-4984** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Palo Alto CA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn. Academic conference on SF and anthropology. Reduced rates for students.

6–8—**WolfCon. (902) 542-9306.** Old Orchard Inn, Wolfville NS. G. G. Kay. SF, fantasy, multi-media.

6–8—**ConSonance. (800) 866-9245 or (510) 763-6415.** Radisson, San Jose CA. SF folksinging con.

6–8—**World Horror Con. (615) 226-6172.** Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza, Nashville TN. Richard Matheson.

6–8—**WisCon. (608) 231-2324.** Holiday Inn Southeast, Madison WI. Trina Robbins. Feminism and SF.

6–8—**CzarKon. (314) 725-6448.** St. Louis MO. A small, adults (age 21) only relaxacon.

13–15—**CrackerCon.** Baymeadows Holiday Inn, Jacksonville FL. M. Lackey, L. Dixon, Jack Haldeman.

20–22—**LunaCon, Box 338, New York NY 10150.** Hilton, Rye Brook NY. Delany, Lehr, Singer, Rusch.

20–22—**NeoCon, Box 48431, Wichita KS 67201. (316) 687-6424.** Budrys, H. Waldrop, D. L. Anderson.

25–29—**ICFA, 500 NW 20th, HU-50, B-9, Florida Atlantic Univ., Boca Raton FL 33431.** Academic con.

26–29—**Magnum Opus Con, Box 6585, Athens GA 30604. (404) 549-1533.** Greenville SC. M. Bradley.

26–29—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 248-2010.** Usually has many writer guests.

27–29—**MillenniCon, Box 636, Dayton OH 45405. (513) 294-1997.** Kube-McDowell, Willinger, Breuer.

27–29—**MidSouthCon, Box 22749, Memphis TN 38122. (901) 274-7355 or 382-1731.** Springer, Weis.

27–29—**DemiCon, Box 7572, Des Moines IA 50322. (515) 270-1312.** Rob Chilson, D. Cherry, M. Logan.

27–29—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790.** On SUNY campus. Farmer, Janifer, Doherty, M. Resnick.

27–29—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. (504) 455-0972.** Orson S. Card. Gaming/comics guests.

APRIL 1992

10–12—**TechniCon, Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063. (703) 953-1214.** On the Va. Tech campus. Perkins.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3–7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $110 to 7/15/92.

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2–6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. #1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** SF WorldCon.

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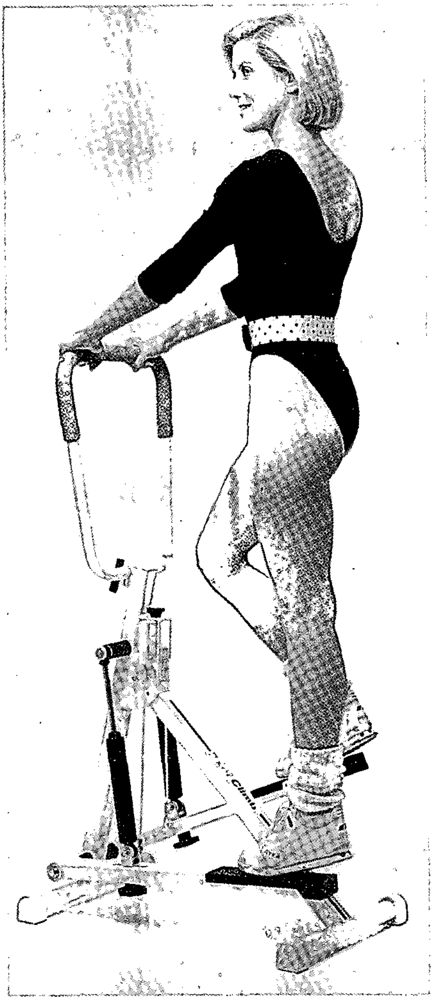

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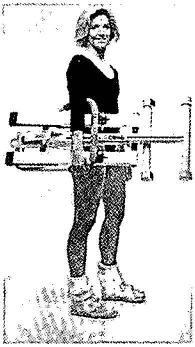

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